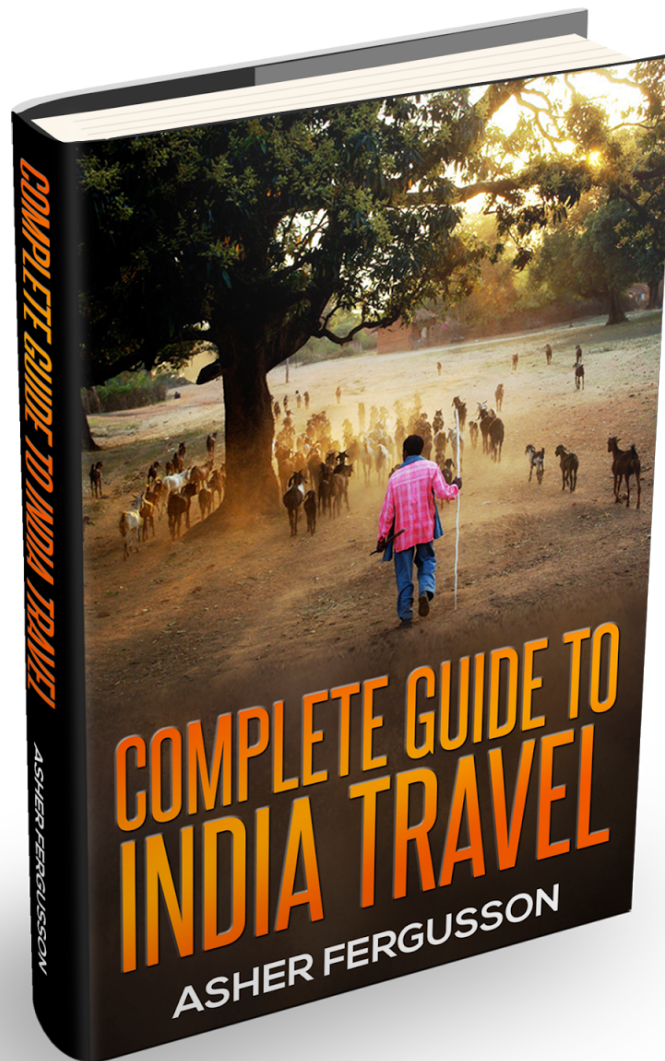




# Complete Guide to India Travel (2016)

By Asher Fergusson

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## Table of Contents

|                                                                     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| What Should I Bring to India?                                       | 4  |
| Using Mobile (Cell) Phones in India                                 | 9  |
| Handling, Exchanging & Sending Money to India                       | 13 |
| Travel on Indian Trains, Planes, Buses, Cars, Auto & Bike Rickshaws | 15 |
| 12 Tips for Eating in India as a Tourist Who Avoids Getting Sick    | 19 |
| 8 Tips for Safe Drinking Water in India                             | 24 |
| Indian Hotels – 9 Tips To Have The Best Experience As a Tourist     | 28 |
| How to Stay Healthy in India as a Western Tourist                   | 31 |
| Shopping in India – How to Bargain Like an Indian                   | 35 |
| Indian Temples – 11 Tips to Enjoy Your Visit to an Indian Temple    | 37 |
| Communication in India                                              | 41 |
| Pictures of India & 6 Tips to Become a Better Photographer          | 44 |
| Pollution in India                                                  | 46 |

I hope you enjoy reading as much as I have writing!



# What should I bring to India?

A lot of people were asking me, “What should I bring to India?” so I wrote this list of all the things I bring every trip. Here are my top 17 must have items for India travel.

1) **Visa:** All foreigners to India need a visa issued by the Indian government. Most countries are allowed a 30 day e-visa or a 6 month tourist visa with multiple entries and will all fees including shipping and photos it costs around \$200. US citizens can get a multiple entry tourist visa that is valid for up to 10 years. I recommend using [VisaHQ.com](http://VisaHQ.com) to avoid any hassle.



2) **Travel Insurance:** I personally use World Nomads. They are the best travel insurance provider I've used because it's designed by travelers for travelers and covers everything you'll need. In India you need to expect the unexpected. This travel insurance company gives me the peace of mind to go forth on the adventure while knowing I have financial support if I get into an emergency or have all my belongings stolen! (This unfortunately happened to a close friend. He had no insurance and so had to replace his stolen belongings out of pocket).



[View their plans at WorldNomads.com ->](http://WorldNomads.com)

3) **SteriPEN (Water Purifier):** I generally only drink bottled water while traveling in India but occasionally it's not available. In that case I bust out my travel SteriPEN which uses ultraviolet light to kill all bacteria and other amoebas in the water. It's fairly pricey but totally worth it to prevent getting sick from waterborne illnesses.



[View on Amazon.com ->](http://Amazon.com)

4) **Charcoal tablets:** They're an incredibly effective way of stopping diarrhea and preventing dysentery (Delhi Belly). It quickly absorbs the toxins or pathogens that are causing the problem and keeps you strong. Whenever I have any sign of diarrhea, I take 2-4 tablets and typically within 1 or 2 hours I am back normal – they are literally lifesavers!



to

[View on Amazon.com ->](http://Amazon.com)

5) **Female Urination Device:** Okay, don't get weirded out by this one. India is a place with limited toilets and when you do find a toilet they are often absolutely disgusting. For guys, this is not a problem because we can stand at the side of the road to pee but for women that's not possible. Indian ladies have mastered the art of squatting discretely without mooning curious onlookers. This little device enables Western women to stand and pee with no mess and no embarrassment. My wife uses it and says it's great □ [View on Amazon.com->](http://Amazon.com)



6) **Passport Pouch:** You obviously need a passport and visa for India travel but I also recommend you get a pouch for your passport. I keep my money and credit cards in this pouch under my shirt so that I don't have to have a wallet in my pocket. I have had beggars put their hand in my pocket and have found the small concealed passport pouch invaluable.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



7) **Indian power adapter:** The Indian power plugs are different from anywhere else in the world, although they seem to be similar to what they use in Europe. I always bring a couple of these power adapters to avoid headache.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



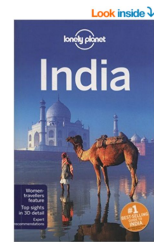
8) **Swiss Army Knife:** I absolutely love my pocket Swiss army knife. I take it with me where ever I travel. It has a tool for everything you'll ever need from a good fruit knife to nail scissors, a hack saw, screw driver and 30 other tools! This item is the reason I have to always check at least one bag on flights because it has saved me so many times with fixing something or improving my experience at a cheap (or expensive) hotel.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



9) **India Lonely Planet Guide Book:** I highly recommend getting the latest India guide book before you go because it's like a bible that gives all the insider tips of the most popular (and not so popular) locations around India. Often times Internet is not available in India and this book replaces the need for looking up hotels online and finding your next stop.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



10) **Electrolytes:** Electrolytes save lives on a daily basis. When someone has dysentery or diarrhea they get very dehydrated and in extreme cases this can lead to death. I'm not trying scare you but this highlights the value of having electrolytes for if you get sick. Even if you don't get sick it is important to stay well hydrated in the hot, dry weather of India and these satchels can easily be added to your bottled water for an extra boost of hydration. Note: You can get electrolytes cheaply in India but in my experience they are low quality and taste horrible.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



11) **Dust Masks:** Pollution in India can be extremely bad especially in the big cities. If you're driving in an open air auto rickshaw then you're likely to get asphyxiated by the fumes and smog. Dust masks help tremendously and make life much easier. You can also use a cloth or bandana but the dust mask is most likely to stop even micro particles.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



**12) Headlamp:** India's power fluctuates and in certain parts frequently goes out all together. If I need light then the headlamp is must-have item in your India packing list. It enables you to be hands free and provides a strong light source. It's also great for train rides and early morning hikes. It might look a little funny but it's totally worth having, especially in case of emergency.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



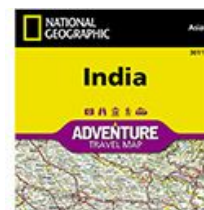
**13) Camera:** India is a place of endless eye candy and spectacles that you won't see anywhere else. Naturally a camera comes in handy. I recommend any Canon Powershotcamera that ideally takes AA batteries. I personally use a DSLR Canon 60D but it is too big and heavy for most people to bother bringing.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



**14) India (National Geographic Adventure Map):** This marvelous country is so vast that it is considered a continent. To fully appreciate it's depth and breadth and to know where I am visiting in regards to the major landmarks I carry this quality map with me on my travels. Whether you're hiking the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas or relaxing on the beach under a palm tree in Kerala, this detailed map covers it all.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



**15) Ear Plugs:** India is an extremely noisy place. On the back of every truck it says "horn please" because they use sound to help know where other vehicles are. Also in the temples it can be very noisy with bells and yelling. I carry ear plugs to help make the noise pollution more bearable and this makes my overall experience much better.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



**16) Travel First Aid Kit:** It's inevitable that you'll get a cut or scrape or some little thing that would need a first aid kit. The item I use most are band aids to help prevent infection in a wound. I also like to put honey on the cut before I place the band aid because it acts as an antibacterial shield. There are drug stores (chemists) all over India but it's nice to come prepared with basic, lightweight, high quality first aid equipment.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



**17) Travel Toilet Paper:** Believe it or not, toilet paper is still mostly unused in India. Only the more expensive hotels carry it. When you're out and about you will be hard pressed to find a place that has any at all! There is travel toilet paper available on Amazon or you can simply bring a few normal rolls from home – although they can be too bulky to carry around.

[View on Amazon.com ->](#)



## Other items to bring to India

Below are the rest of the items I don't travel to India without. 😊 For your convenience, I have linked all items to the product I use on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

|                                           |                                             |                                          |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <a href="#">Dental Floss</a>              | <a href="#">Ayurvedic medicines</a>         | <a href="#">Fleece</a>                   |
| <a href="#">Toothbrush</a>                | <a href="#">Hand sanitizer</a>              | <a href="#">Crocs</a>                    |
| <a href="#">Band aids</a>                 | <a href="#">Feminine items (for ladies)</a> | <a href="#">iPod</a>                     |
| <a href="#">Sunscreen</a>                 | <a href="#">Dried fruit</a>                 | <a href="#">Diary</a>                    |
| <a href="#">Bug repellent</a>             | <a href="#">Almond butter</a>               | <a href="#">Mosquito net</a>             |
| <a href="#">Homeopathic medicines</a>     | <a href="#">Thermal underwear</a>           | <a href="#">Lock for door</a>            |
| <a href="#">Sun hat</a>                   | <a href="#">Head lamp</a>                   | <a href="#">Lock for suitcase</a>        |
| <a href="#">Clothes pegs</a>              | <a href="#">Map of India</a>                | <a href="#">Backpack</a>                 |
| <a href="#">Suitcase</a>                  | <a href="#">Tripod</a>                      | <a href="#">Mini tripod</a>              |
| <a href="#">SD cards for camera</a>       | <a href="#">DSLR lens protector</a>         | <a href="#">Camera bag</a>               |
| <a href="#">Rechargeable AA batteries</a> | <a href="#">Small cheap computer</a>        | <a href="#">Power adaptor</a>            |
| <a href="#">Transformer/converter</a>     | <a href="#">Rope</a>                        | <a href="#">Treking gear (if hiking)</a> |

## What NOT to bring to India

I thought to also add a quick list of things that you probably should not bring to India.

**1) DON'T BRING too many clothes.** You can buy clothes cheaply in India and can get the local dress so that you fit in better and feel more comfortable.

**2) DON'T BRING valuables in general.** Unless it's absolutely necessary, why risk it? Valuables such as: passport, credit cards & cash I carry concealed under my shirt in my [passport pouch](#).

**3) DON'T BRING too much cash.** ATMs are the safest way to get local cash and they are everywhere across India.

**4) DON'T BRING expensive jewelry.** It's just not worth risking losing it or getting it stolen.

**5) DON'T BRING your computer.** Unless you really need it and it's a lightweight, cheap one (such as a [Chromebook](#)) that you don't mind getting fried by the irregular power supply or stolen.

**6) DON'T BRING other unnecessary electronics.** Again because of the chance of it getting ruined by the power supply and the excess bulk.

**7) DON'T BRING too many books.** An e-reader like the [Amazon Kindle](#) can be a great option because it's light weight and has a 3 week battery life.

**8) DON'T BRING too many toiletries but do bring your favorites.** Your special products are probably not available in India but generic soap, shampoo and toothpaste etc is widely available.

**9) DON'T BRING nice shoes.** They will get dirty no matter what. Sandals or [Crocs](#) are best.

**10) DON'T BRING bulky towels.** Instead bring a simple [travel towel](#).

**11) DON'T BRING more than one set of warm clothes.** India is a hot country (unless you're in the Himalayas) and it's rare to be too cold. I only bring one good, lightweight [fleece](#) and one pair of long pants plus a scarf or shawl.

**12) DON'T BRING anything that isn't suitable for your destination.** Do your research on weather and location specific needs before you go to India so that you are prepared without having too much bulk in your luggage.

Obviously this is quite a long packing list for India and won't apply to everyone but it gives you a good idea of what I bring (& DON'T bring) on my travels to India. If you have questions on any of the items above, feel free to ask them in the comments below.

# Step-by-Step Guide to Using Cell Phones in India + How to Get a Local SIM Card



## Quick facts:

- a) India has recently surpassed [1 BILLION](#) cell phones in use which is 40x the number of their landlines!
- b) The cell phone coverage and reception is pretty darn good across most of the country (except for some remote rural areas) and the rates per minute are among the cheapest in the world.

## Here's the deal:

Follow these tips below to learn how to get a SIM card (without getting scammed), what the going rates are, how to recharge your plan and which phone should you use.

## 1) Firstly, why do you need a cell phone for India?

Some people say, "I don't know anyone in India, so why do I need a cell phone?" There are several good reasons, such as to:

- Make a reservation at your next hotel in another state.
- Communicate with a fellow traveler.
- Call the authorities or an ambulance in an emergency.
- Cross check something that a scamming taxi driver says.
- Look up a Google Map or Wikipedia entry.

- Call your new Indian friend or your family at home.
- Send an email or text to anyone in the world.
- Make a calculation at a shop to verify you're not being ripped off!

There are of course a million other reasons that you could need a cell phone but you get the idea.

## 2) Make sure your phone is compatible with the GSM band

The GSM (Global System for Mobile Communications) frequency band for India is the same as Europe and most parts of the world at GSM 900 and GSM 1800. The US and Americas GSM is different so your US mobile cell phone might not work in India (check to be sure).

Also, it is best to get a local SIM card so you will require an unlocked phone that can take new SIM cards. I've listed a few of my suggested phones below.

If you're wondering, "*what the heck is a SIM card?!*" — it's the little chip inside a phone that connects to your provider. In the US the service providers typically lock them into the phone so you can't easily change carriers. As far as I know, almost all other countries have phones that are unlocked.



## 3) Bring a phone from home that you don't mind losing

I have a [cheap phone](#) I use specifically for my India trips because I'm not going to take my \$900 iPhone. This brings me peace of mind and assurance that I'm not about to waste a ton of money if it gets lost or stolen.

Although, that's what [travel insurance](#) is for :)

## 4) Bring copies of your passport/visa & passport sized photos

To buy a SIM card in India you will be required to provide a copy of your passport and visa as well as some passport sized photos of yourself.

Often times you'll also need to show proof of your Indian address which can be a letter from your hotel manager. Additionally, you may be asked for proof of your home address which could be a copy of your driver's license.

I know, this is pretty strict but they say it is to help curb terrorists using cell phones in India...

## 5) Where can you buy the actual SIM card and also where do you recharge your SIM minutes?

I like to try to get a SIM card from the International airport that I arrived in India at. They are usually more organized and more likely to not cause any troubles when compared to getting one from a vendor on the street. Although, this means you likely will have to already have proof of address in hand before you arrive in India.

If you don't manage to get one from the airport then the next best option is to go to an official office of one of the top service providers such as Airtel, Vodafone or Reliance. These can be found in every major city across India. If in doubt ask your hotel to help you organize it.

One thing to note is that it can take a while for them to verify your address and you should insist that they do because otherwise the SIM will "magically" be turned off after just a few weeks of service!

You can recharge your SIM card minutes or data at any participating vendor on the street that is displaying your service provider's logo. Make sure you see that your phone actually recharges while you're in the shop in order to [avoid getting scammed](#).



## 6) How much should the SIM card cost?

The actual SIM card shouldn't cost more than 150 to 200 rupees and the average costs for calls, texts and data are as follows (approx. 67 rupees to US\$1):

- Local calls = 1 rupee/ minute
- Local texts = 1 rupee/ minute
- International calls = around 7 rupees/ minute
- International texts = around 5 rupees/ minute
- 3G data with Airtel = approx. [300 rs/ 1GB](#)
- 4G data with Airtel = approx. [650 rs/ 1GB](#)

The convenience of having 3G mobile Internet is pretty epic when you're in outback India checking



Facebook while on a train but it can get expensive fast if you're doing a lot of work. In this case, you may be better off to get a [3G Dongle](#) that connects via USB to your laptop. The same documentation as above will be needed for getting your hands on one of those suckers.

## 7) Which is the best cell phone service provider to use in India?

These are my favorite carriers in India:

- [Airtel](#)
- [Reliance](#)
- [Vodafone](#)
- [Idea](#)

I have had the best experience and coverage with Airtel and Vodafone. Although, all of them seem to have quite terrible customer service so be warned and be patient.

In the picture above you can see a couple of friends of mine when we set up an office in India for a working holiday there.



## 8) Lastly, beware that SIM cards have a limited life

Usually a Simcard will stop working after 3 months of inactivity. They claim this is to stop terrorism. It is a bit annoying if you plan to come back next year. One way around it is to lend it to your friends who may be going to India within the 3 months after you get back.

Typically you should expect that you'll need a new SIM card every time you go to India.

# Handling, Exchanging & Sending Money to India - A Tourist's Perspective

## 1) Airport currency exchange

Avoid airport currency exchanges unless you have to get a couple of thousand rupees to start out. They give the worst [exchange rates](#) out of practically anywhere in India. The general exchange rate (as of January 2014) to keep in mind is Rs 60 for US \$1.

## 2) Forex Companies

Instead, I recommend using a [Forex company](#) (which obviously requires you having some cash.) When you arrive at your hotel tell the manager you would like to exchange some money and would like them to get a Forex representative to come to your room. They should give the best exchange rate up 5 or 10 rupees better than an airport.

## 3) Indian ATM's

You probably don't want to carry around more than 20,000 – 50,000 rupees at a time so at some point you will run out. The next best way to get more cash is at the ATM's which are now almost everywhere. I recommend going there with a friend and driver nearby and to avoid showing how much money you withdrew. Also a money pouch concealed under clothing is very necessary. I've had many a hand reach into my pockets (or at least they tried to). Some ATM's are really annoying and don't work so it can take being persistent and going to multiple branches.



## 4) Use a Citibank ATM to withdraw more than 10,000rs at one time.

As far as I know, all other ATMs across India will not let you withdraw more than \$150 (10,000rs). With all the fees you may have in your home country this can be quite annoying and costly. Citibank allows you to withdraw whatever your daily maximum in your home country is e.g \$500.

## 5) 10 rupee notes

One of the best tips I can give for handling money when you're cruising around India is to have a wad of brand new, crispy 10 rupee notes in addition to a few smaller wads of 100's, 500's and 1000's. "Why" you may ask? Well for starters the 10 rupee notes are often disgustingly used and dirty.

Secondly it's one of the smallest denominations (they do have 5's but don't bother) of money in a note, so it is used for everyday purchases *a lot of the time*. It's the perfect size for tips. It also helps with bargaining because you can say, "I've only got 80 rupees" and you then carefully pull out exactly 80 rupees.

Otherwise if you've got a 500 rupee note then it's unlikely the shop owner will have change and won't want to go below 100 rupees. I have seen countless newbies losing 50 and 100 rupees at a time just in tips!



So how does one get these brand new 10 rupee notes? Simply go to a bank and exchange 1 or 2 thousand rupees for 10's and ask for new ones.

## 5) Sending Money to India

[ICIC Bank](#) is good and allows people to easily send money to India if you have an account with them. [ING](#) can be found in most parts of India and so if you have an account outside of India with them then it may be easy for you transfer money. Another option to send money to India is using the service provided with [Western Union](#). I have friends that have successfully used this service many times. Last but not least is using Bitcoin to send money to India and the beauty of this method is that there are no transaction fees!

# Travel on Indian Trains, Planes, Buses, Cars, Auto & Bike Rickshaws

## 1) Trains

I think traveling on trains through India is a must for everyone at least once. Often the tickets sell out early so I recommend booking ahead of time on [Cleartrip.com](http://Cleartrip.com). When you're actually on the train and cruising through the countryside it can be an exhilarating experience. It is definitely my favorite way to go apart from flying. I recommend only going on 2AC or First Class because otherwise it will be too cramped and potentially too hot. I find that sleeping on trains is very easy but it's important to keep an eye on your bags or lock them. The train staff often come through with water, chai, snacks and fried foods. It is best to avoid everything unless it's packaged like bottled water and packaged snacks. Trains mostly only stop at a station for about a minute so it's important to know where your stop is and be ready to get all your bags off before you get to the desired station.

## 2) Train Stations

Train stations are the one thing I don't like about traveling on trains in India. They generally stink of urine and can have dubious characters hanging out there as well as insane taxi drivers who almost fight each other for your business. One important thing that I wish I'd known when leaving the station is to act like you know where you are going and walk straight out without looking left and right. Otherwise you are likely to be pounced upon by a mob of hungry taxi drivers. Always outside the stations are little shops with snacks that I recommend going to, buying something and then asking them the best way to get to your destination and see if they recommend a driver. This will give you the best chance of not being scammed or tricked. Also it's good to watch out for the driver taking you to a different hotel or destination than what you asked for because they often have deals with hotels if they bring in new customers.

## 3) Airplanes

The airplanes of India are the same as in all parts of the world. This is obviously the best way to travel long distances throughout India. The tickets are usually quite affordable and can get you to almost every major destination across the country. Mainly regional flights are routed through Delhi which can be infuriating because a journey that should have been 2 hours turns into an all day event.



## 4) Airports

The Indian airports can look and feel exactly the same as a Western airport if they've been built within the last couple of years. Otherwise they can be a bit seedy or look like a converted army base. They can be aggressive in not allowing you to take pictures around airports so watch out for that. Also when you are organizing a taxi to your hotel I recommend getting the hotel to send their driver to pick you up (if you can afford it) or get a fixed price taxi. Avoid just walking out of the airport without a plan. The drivers know you've just come from the West and smell money so they can quote absolutely outrageous prices for a 10 minute journey. Ready this article to learn: [How to navigate Indian airports - it's harder than you think!](#)

## 5) Buses

Buses can be an okay way to travel through India but nowhere near as pleasant as the trains. As you may be able to imagine the Indian roads are generally mayhem with vehicles zig-zagging like there's no tomorrow. I recommend going on the bus only if it is less than 5 hours and is a nice "AC" bus. One perk is that it's usually super cheap like Rs 200 for a 5-hour journey.



## 6) Bus Stations

All the bus stations I've been are usually busy places with literally hundreds of buses coming and going. There can be beggar's hanging around there who may ask for money (I never give them anything.) They also have places for chai and snacks. It can be tricky finding your bus so asking for help usually solves that dilemma.

## 7) Cars

Cars (with a hired driver) are a great way to travel short distances through cities especially if it's AC and the windows are closed. The noise and pollution is generally obnoxious in every Indian city and so if you have the money this is by far the best way to get around. You can usually organize a driver through your hotel and they should be able to get to any address in the city. As soon as the journey becomes more than an hour or two it can be extremely tiring and dangerous especially at night when trucks are driving like mad men.



## 8) Auto Rickshaws

The auto rickshaws (aka “auto’s”) are the best way to get around a town if you’re on a tight budget. They are extremely cheap (as long as you can bargain the driver down.) So what are the drawbacks? They are open to the air to receive the pollution, noise, flying objects and if you have a crash with a truck then you’d be history. That being said I ride on auto’s all the time but use earplugs, sunglasses, and a cloth to breath through to avoid breathing the pollution.

## 9) Bicycle Rickshaws

Bike rickshaws are kind of an amusing novelty and can be a fun way to explore the narrow streets of new town. When you think about it, it is rather cruel to have this skinny little boy pedal a bicycle with you sitting in the carriage behind and I think they are actually illegal but in certain cities they still persist.

## 10) Travel time

I believe you will enjoy your journey most if you remain well rested and don’t get exhausted. Travel is tiring in general but travel in India is probably about 3 times as tiring as it is in the West. This is because, depending how you choose to get around, you will be bombarded by so

much sensory stimulation. For this reason I recommend traveling no more than 5 hours in one day unless it's a train where you can comfortably lie horizontally and sleep.

## 11) Travel pricing

Obviously traveling by plane is the most expensive. Trains are the next most expensive if you travel 2AC or First Class (First Class is generally double the cost of 2AC but you get your own compartment!) Buses are cheap. Rented cars especially if they are AC are nice but can be very expensive. Auto rickshaws are cheap but the drivers love to scam you so the trick is to walk and go to the next driver and then the prices will quickly lower. Bike rickshaws are super cheap.



## 12) Travel Comfort

If you are going for a super comfortable journey and have a good budget then flying and renting AC cars is definitely the way to go. Trains are a great second choice and are extremely affordable compared to flying. Taxi's and buses are uncomfortable if they are any more than an hour or 2 journeys.

## 13) Travel Pillow

I love to sleep. If I don't have my pillow it can be more difficult so if you're like me I suggest you bring a small foldable pillow. I don't care if you're laughing at me right now :). I have happily slept many hours in trains, planes and automobiles thanks to my little pillow. It is also useful when going to hotels, especially the cheaper ones that have pillows filled with cardboard!

# 11 Tips for Eating in India as a Tourist Who Avoids Getting Sick

## How Do I Avoid “Delhi Belly”?

After traveling in India for sometime it becomes apparent that life there revolves around three things: eating delicious food, worshiping God and doing these two activities with one's extended family. Below is a list of tips I've learned to help you stay healthy while still enjoying the absolute delight of eating cuisine in India.

### 1) What types of food do people eat in India?

There is a wide variety of incredibly delicious cuisine such as all kinds of amazing curried vegetables, flat breads, rice, lentils, chutneys, fresh cheeses, fruits and endless exquisite sweets made from milk, sugar and wheat. Most Indians are lacto-vegetarians although some people eat chicken or fish but rarely red meat.



Every town has its unique style and specialties for you to explore and indulge in. It's definitely wise to take precautions and know **what not to eat in India** as this is the most likely cause of getting dysentery.

The safest way to eat in India is to never eat from vendors on the street and only visit classy restaurants that are busy and look “clean”. Often times 4 or 5 star hotels may be the best bet for buying mouth watering, tummy satisfying, safe food.

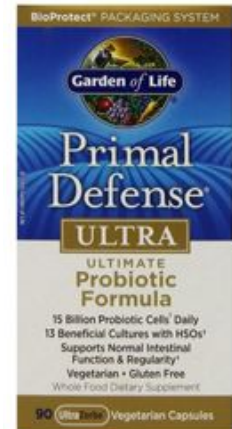
### What's the bottom line?

You will inevitably be exposed to some kind of “bugs” while you're in India but you will only get sick if your body can't handle them, which is usually due to overeating and weak immunity or digestion. Follow these tips below and you will minimize the chances of getting sick.

## 2) Probiotics and charcoal are lifesavers!

[Probiotics](#) boost the good bacteria in your stomach, improve digestion and increase natural immunity. They are a must before traveling to India, especially during your travels and afterwards when you get home. They're also generally good for all round digestive health, even when you're not planning a trip to India.

[Charcoal tablets](#) on the other hand are an incredibly effective way of stopping diarrhea and preventing dysentery (Delhi Belly). It quickly absorbs the toxins or pathogens that are causing the problem and keeps you strong. As always, be sure to get advice from your doctor about dosages etc.



## 3) Only eat cooked food & avoid salads or juices

Cooking kills most bacteria and amoeba's. If you see a tempting freshly squeezed juice, salad or fruit platter (even at 5 star hotels) don't eat it! I have many friends who succumbed to the temptation and ended up running for the bathroom a couple of hours later. So only eat freshly cooked food from a busy restaurant with high turnover.



## 4) Don't overeat! It'll save your digestive fire

As easy as it is to gorge on delicious food, I advise that overeating is the #1 cause of any problem with digestion when visiting India. It is a rather simple point but the only times I've gotten sick in India were when I didn't follow this rule.

For example, this one time I had a huge meal with chapati's (flat bread) and all kinds of tasty treats followed by 7 Gulab Jamans (famous sweet condensed milk dumpling). Within about 6 to 8 hours (in the middle of the night) I was praying to the white god (toilet) until I had nothing left. Not very pleasant to say the least!

Keeping your digestive power strong also naturally boosts your immunity so that your body easily fends off unwanted germs. To help with my digestion, immunity and overall health I also take these amazing [Organic Amla Berry tablets](#). They are an incredible source of Vitamin C (20x more than an orange) and a great source of antioxidants. Another great herb I use is called [Bio-Immune](#).



## 5) Consider becoming a vegetarian while in India

India has the lowest meat consumption rates in the world (see graph below). The meat I've seen looks very unsafe, often hanging in the warm, open air with flies buzzing around. In fact, due to Hindu religious reasons, the state of Maharashtra has banned beef altogether. If you can, I recommend being a vegetarian while in India to reduce the chances of getting serious food poisoning.



## 6) Can you eat street food in India?... No!

Many times when walking on the street in India you will come across some amazing looking “street food”. As tempting as it can be, I highly recommend that you avoid eating street food in India at all costs. I actually have a friend who died from an E. Coli infection due to eating unsafe street food in India. This is an extreme case, but I always like to play it safe. Don’t risk getting some weird parasite, bacteria or amoeba from what may look and smell like “safe” food, wafting out of a saucepan at the side of the road, like you can see in this picture.



## 7) What to do if you get a parasite?

Obviously consulting your doctor is an important first step. If they think you have parasites then they’ll probably prescribe strong pharmaceuticals to kill the parasites. There are also natural remedies which I have successfully used such as: [charcoal](#), [garlic tablets](#), [pumpkin seeds](#), [neem](#), [wormwood](#) and this amazing Ayurvedic herbal supplement called “[Flora Tone](#)” which supports the colon’s natural ability to remove parasites.

Also, probiotics are again very useful in boosting the good bacteria in the stomach after having parasites or taking antibiotics.

## 8) Use your hands to eat - it’s fun!

Some people (me included) love using their hands to eat while in India. This can actually be more hygienic than using utensils because you know where your hands have been and whether or not they’re clean.

Plates and utensils at restaurants are often times not clean even though they may appear to be because they have been wiped with a dirty dish cloth. For this reason I recommend wiping your eating ware with a paper napkin before use. Also don’t wipe your plate clean at the end of the meal. Instead leave a thin layer of food between you and the plate.



**Note:** [Hand wipes](#) & [hand sanitizer](#) definitely helps kill the germs before eating with your hands in India!

## 9) Avoid eating too much spicy food, especially chilli's

Spicy food is good in moderation to keep your digestive fire high but too much is not good for the Western physiology. Spices actually act as a mild laxative, which is something you probably don't want. The main culprit to watch out for is red and green chillies. Even when you ask for no chili (mirch nahin in Hindi) you will probably get it anyway, so you have to be firm about it. Also it's good to have some antidotes ready like plain rice, bread, yoghurt etc.



## 10) Local's restaurants can be great & often they're all-you-can-eat for \$1!

It can be fun to visit the local favorite restaurant and get an all you can eat thali (plate) of various dishes for just Rs 50 (\$1). I often do this and love it! It's important to be careful here and only visit busy restaurants and be extra aware of the utensils. In South India it is common to be served on a banana leaf which is quite a novelty, but obviously dangerous as far as hygiene is concerned, so you definitely don't want to be wiping it clean.

## 11) Family home dining is a pleasure but be careful

Many times when you make friends with an Indian you will be invited to their home for a meal. This a real treat and reflects the Indian proverb that "guest is god". I have had the best food of my life at peoples homes.

Again, it is important to be cautious and don't drink tap water, only have cooked food and don't overeat. Also don't eat too fast because they will keep piling the food on your plate and expect you to eat it and even force-feed you if you're not careful (this has happened to me a few times).



# 8 Tips for Safe Drinking Water in India - A Tourist's Perspective

## Can I Drink Tap Water in India?

### Here's the deal:

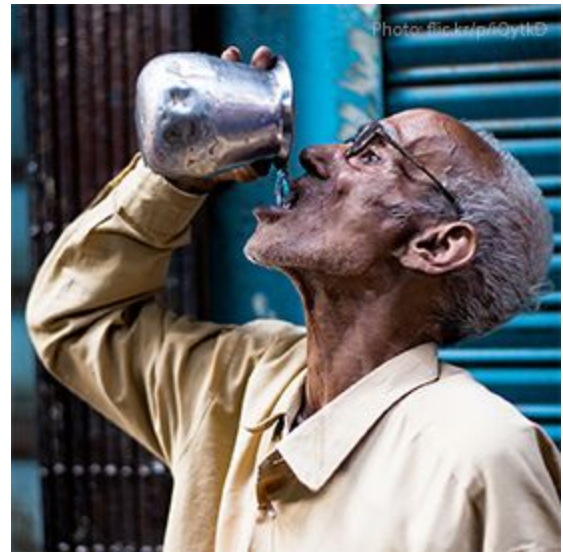
The short answer to this question is, "no".

The water supply in India can often be full of all kinds of pollution such as arsenic, it's typically extremely unsafe, and because water is the best carrier of disease it's an easy way to get sick.

In fact, one time a family member of mine got a terrible flesh eating parasite from drinking unsafe, dirty tap water in India.

These India travel tips are not to be taken lightly and caution is highly recommended. I don't want to scare you from going, but bad water is the #1 cause of dysentery and parasite infection in India and around the world.

Follow these tips below and you should stay healthy.



## 1) Only drink the best bottled mineral water

The best bottled mineral water brands in India I recommend are: Bisleri, Kinley and Aquafina (in that order) and you can get them practically everywhere in India in many different sized bottles.

The reason why going with these brands is helpful is because these companies are owned by giants like Coca-Cola and Pepsi. They therefore have the highest standards with their filtration process when compared to the lesser known, local brands of bottled water which have been shown to sometimes still have unwanted pollutants.

It is important to check the seal because occasionally conniving shop owners will refill the bottles and try to glue the lid back on! I recommend



only drinking room temperature water because cold drinks will weaken your digestion and they also charge more for the refrigerated drinks. Also avoid ice in drinks because typically the water used to make the ice is not sanitary.

## 2) What should I do if bottled water isn't available?

The only time this has happened to me was when I went trekking in the Indian Himalayas. In this case, I brought a [Katadyn Pocket Water Filter](#) and got the water from flowing rivers.

Another more affordable product that works well is a [Steripen](#) which uses UV to “destroy over 99.9% of harmful microorganisms in water.” To be 100% safe, it is also good to use [Iodine Tablets](#) and to boil the water for a few minutes to be certain that all the bacteria, such as Giardia, has been killed.



## 3) Water scarcity in India is a growing problem

India definitely has a water scarcity and water quality problem and it is acute, even a “crisis,” in certain locations of the sub continent. As you pass through the countryside in every little village there are large wells where women and children can be seen pumping water into plastic jugs. This water is usually contaminated, not sanitary and definitely should be avoided by any Western tourist.

Thankfully the water shortage issue is typically not a problem for tourists because we can afford to buy the best brand name mineral water...



## 4) Drink a lot - stay hydrated

India is mostly a hot, dry country with daytime temperatures typically ranging from 25C – 40C (75F – 105F). So I find that I need to drink at least 2 litres (1/2 a gallon) per day in order to remain hydrated and healthy. If you are doing physical exertion like hiking at elevation you will need to drink even more.

## 5) Other beverages to try

Fresh coconuts are my favorite for sure. They are extremely good at hydrating you, giving you electrolytes and making your upset stomach, happy. **Note:** If you want to be super careful, don't drink coconuts unless you're satisfied with the cleanliness of both the straw and knife that the coconut vendor is using. You can even bring your own pack of straws to be safe.

There are a few bottled drinks that are also really good like Nimbooz (lemon drink), Mango Frooti (mango drink) and Coca Cola. There is a popular belief that Coke helps kill bacteria in your system. This may or may not be true but it sure is nice to have a cold Coke on a hot afternoon in India and it has worked for me countless times :).

## 6) Chai (famous Indian tea)

There is nothing like a fresh, sweet chai drunk from a fine china cup. It is one of India's favorite past times (dating back 5,000 years or more), but the present day version with black tea was influenced by a promotional campaign by the (British-owned) *India Tea Association* in the early 1900's.

Chai has a lot of milk and sugar along with Ayurvedic spices such as cardamom and ginger. There are chai stands at almost every corner and it should be safe to drink as long as you see them boiling it properly and you're certain the cup is clean. These days they often use a new plastic disposable cup which is good for hygiene but bad for the disgusting trash piles that build up. Other stands have glass cups which are almost always dirty because they are reused very quickly and not washed properly so watch out! The chai shouldn't cost more than 5 or 10 rupees.



## 7) Electrolytes are essential

Electrolytes literally save peoples lives. When you have dysentery the best thing is coconut water and also adding electrolytes to your water. These replenish the lack of fluids in the stomach and will save you from passing out from dehydration. I recommend bringing one box from home with a flavor like blueberry-acai because otherwise they can be low quality and taste a bit nasty if bought in India.

## 8) Brush teeth with bottled mineral water

As annoying as it may seem I advise you to only brush your teeth with bottled water (that's me on the right).

Since all tap water in India is usually contaminated with both bacteria & pollutants, it's



not safe, even for brushing your teeth. Another reason to take this precaution is because the gums can be a direct path to the blood stream allowing infection to get in.

**What's the bottom line?**

Be super careful with all water in India and then you'll minimize the chances of getting sick while maximizing your enjoyment of India.

# Hotels in India - 10 Tips To Have The Best Experience As a Tourist

## 1) Cheap vs Expensive Hotels

I am lucky (or unlucky?) to have stayed in all types of accommodation in India from \$2/night hotels to deluxe \$350/night 5 star palaces and everything in between. Of course the 5 star hotels are amazing and make you feel like royalty but most people don't have that kind of budget.

Additionally, it kind of feels like you leave India when you go back to the 5 star hotel after a day of adventure (which can be a good thing depending on how you look at it.) I personally enjoy going for the \$2/night hotels because it means I live very well with \$15/day budget. Naturally you've gotta watch out at these hotels because of security, mosquitoes and bed bugs etc. If you are on a budget but don't want to totally "rough it" then there are plenty of mid range options from Rs 500 (\$10) to Rs 2000 (\$40) per night.



## 2) Location, location, location!

I believe location is everything with real estate and hotels are no exception. If I've traveled thousands of miles to visit a special temple I want my hotel to be next door not 2 miles away. So the location is often a criterion when I'm selecting hotels. How do you know where it is? The Lonely Planet books have little maps for all the major towns. [CLICK HERE to view the latest one on Amazon.](#)

## 3) Locking your room

Obviously you'll want to [lock](#) your room when you're out and about. I try not to leave any super valuables like passport and credit cards in my room but sometimes it's simply unavoidable. In that case make sure you hide your valuables cleverly within your suitcase or somewhere that is not visible upon entering. Some people carry their own padlock around so that they feel more secure (I don't do this). Also you'll obviously want to bring your lock inside when you're in the room (so that no one can lock you in!) and also it's wise to lock the door (from the inside) with a bolt lock when sleeping at night.



## 4) Shower flip flops

I recommend having a cheap pair of flip flops or [crocs](#) for the showers. Even in the classy hotels the shower floor can be a bit nasty and who knows what's living there? You can pick up flip flops everywhere in India but if you're like me and have large feet you may have difficulty finding your size. They carry plenty of choices up to men's size 10.

## 5) Mosquito nets

A personal bed [mosquito net](#) is a must for most hotels. Even the more expensive ones often don't have net's over the windows or beds. Malaria is still a problem in India and I've been with people who got a mild form of it. It can be challenging to set up the mosquito net in the \$2 hotels but I always figure it out with an elaborate setup of strings going across the room. You can find these nets in most bazaars across the sub-continent.



Also if you like using mosquito repellent then bring your favorite kind. Additionally they have this little wall plug repellent called "All Out" from Johnson&Johnson which seems to be fairly effective but kind of toxic and I don't enjoy breathing those fumes all night so I don't use it.

## 6) Towels

The cheaper hotels definitely will not provide you with a towel. So I advise you to bring a small [travel towel](#) for drying yourself after showering etc. You can also pick up these towels in India but watch out for colors leaching out into your other clothes.

## 7) Flashlight

A flashlight or [headlamp](#) is a must bring item. The power supply in India is very dubious and can fluctuate from 50 V to 300 V or turn off completely without warning. In this case you will have no lights and could cause problems especially if it's an emergency. Candles can also be good if you are staying in one location for a while.

## 8) Squat toilets

It is changing fairly quickly but many cheap hotels they still only have squat toilets. And you will almost never be provided with toilet paper even when they have Western style toilets. So what to do? Some people bring their own. Alternatively you can learn to use water to clean yourself. I personally like squat toilets because it is more natural for the body to eliminate in that position. If you want to avoid them you'll have to ask the hotel what type of toilet they have before agreeing to stay the night.



## 9) Tipping

It is common to tip in the hotels for tasks the staff do. For example when the bell boys bring up your bags I would give them each Rs 10 (more at 5 star hotels) when they have finished the job. This is where the wad of 10 rupee notes comes in really useful. Other occasions when tipping is recommended is your taxi driver after a decent length journey or when a waiter brings up your breakfast at the hotel etc.

## 10) Hotel reservations

You can make reservations if you want and it is wise to do so in the peak season which is usually November to February. One thing I have learned which is very good to know is that if you pay cash upfront when you arrive you can get a room at a hotel that is already fully booked. People often don't show up for their reservation so don't worry about taking someone's room.

# How to Stay Healthy in India as a Western Tourist

## 1) Getting enough rest

I strongly believe the number one way to remain in good health in India is to stay well rested. This means not over doing it by traveling too much in one day, exerting yourself too much (in the sun) and staying up too late at night. In Ayurveda they recommend going to bed by 10pm and getting up by 6am and I find that this is really true in India.

## 2) Herbs and natural remedies

I am an advocate of prevention rather than cure. It is much easier to prevent an illness than to cure it. Luckily there are some great herbs from Maharishi Ayurveda that can help with this prevention. The herbs I recommend are:

**Ambimap:** *“Ambimap possesses a multi-purpose approach to the control and cure of Diarrhoea (Atisar) and Dysenteries (Pravahika). Counteracts parasitic infection. Effectively controls spasmodic episodes & patient gets relief very quickly.”* My advice is to take one tablet anytime you feel a little funny in the stomach or if you’ve just eaten or drunken something dubious. The only precaution is to watch out for constipation from this herb. My friends and I swear by this herb and if we could only bring one this would be it. Ambimap has literally saved me multiple times.

**Prandhara oil:** *“Prandhara is a unique composition of aromatic oils which brings balance in all three doshas i.e Vata, Pitta and Kapha and treats diverse ailments of upper respiratory tract like cold, nasal congestion, sinusitis etc. It is also very effective in treatment headaches and toothaches. Taken orally prandhara overcomes nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, spasmodic pain and flatulence effectively.”* Prandhara oil is another magic herb that is absolutely invaluable for it’s multiple uses. You can rub it on your chest, inhale the vapour to clear your sinuses by placing a few drops in boiling water and then bending over it with a towel over your head, put a few drops in your water to help fight the onset of stomach problems, gargle to sooth a sore throat, rub it on your temples for a headache or place it on a tooth that is causing an ache. It truly is a magical oil that helps tremendously.

**Flu Season Defense:** *“The herbs in Flu Season Defense: promote well-being and comfort, help balance the moisture level and mucus in the lungs and sinuses, aid digestion for decreased production of toxic food residues, help remove toxins that can weaken resistance and nourish the body’s natural defense mechanism.”* My experience with this herb is that it almost always helps me prevent a cold if I take it early enough. For example if I have a slight feeling of a sore throat coming on or



weak digestion then I will take one of these pills and eat light. Then within an hour or two I feel back to normal.

**Digest Tone (Triphala):** *“A mild laxative, it purifies so gently that when used over a long period of time, it allows even the deepest tissues and organs of the body to release toxins. Despite its powerful cleansing quality, it actually supports food absorption rather than depleting the body of nutrients. Organic Digest Tone promotes ojas, the finest product of digestion, which creates luster in the skin and rejuvenates vital energy.”* I rarely use this herb because I generally have good digestion but if I have overeaten or am feeling a bit sluggish this is a great herb to get your appetite back and feel strong again. It is especially useful if you have constipation which can happen in India.

**Amla Berry:** *“Amla produces total health benefits. It helps: strengthen the mind, eyes, heart, skin, and digestion, build muscle, boosts cellular regeneration, promotes a positive nitrogen balance for improved growth of muscle tissue.”* This is my favorite Ayurvedic herb by far. I have been taking it continuously since 2007! It's a tri-doshic rasayana for the entire body and especially for Pitta types like me. The vitamin C levels are super high and it just makes you feel great.

### 3) Foods and spices for combating amoebas

Interestingly there are many local fruits in India that are the best for helping prevent amoeba contamination. Here are few of the best ones:

#### **Pomegranate (Hindi – Anaar):**

My favorite is the pomegranate because it is so sweet, delicious and does wonders for my digestion. I recommend chewing the seeds and then spitting them out. Watch out for staining your clothes. The method I use is to quarter the pomegranate and then eat it out on the grass where you can let the drips miss your clothes.



#### **Coconut (Hindi – Nariyal):**

Nothing beats a fresh young coconut on a hot Indian day. This miraculous nut (or drupe) is filled with the most amazing nectar that is filled with nutrients, electrolytes and anti-dysentery qualities. It is the best thing to have after a bout of diarrhea and quenches your thirst like nothing else.

#### **Guava (Hindi – Amarud):**

Guava is another really healthy fruit that grows everywhere in India. Along with being super tasty when ripe it helps prevent diarrhea, constipation, colds, and skin irritations. The trick is to wait until it is ripe and then the flavor can be out of this world.

**Ginger (Hindi – Ardrak):**

Fresh ginger is a wonderful digestive aid that is good to have before a meal if you don't have much appetite. Obviously you will need a knife to be able to cut and peel a piece from the stick of ginger. It's also helpful if you have a cold to make a tea out of it and then put it in a thermos and sip throughout the day.

**4) Hygiene**

Obviously keeping yourself clean is essential when in India. Clean hands are a big part of staying healthy especially if you are eating with your hands. Some people use these hygienic wipes to disinfect their hands. You can get most hygiene products in India at the drug stores that are everywhere. The only thing they don't seem to have is dental floss so I would bring that from home.

**5) Avoid overeating**

Overeating is easy to do but a major cause of sickness in India. According to Ayurveda, good digestion = good immunity. The only times I've gotten dysentery in India has been preceded by a good go at overeating. For example it was a friend's birthday and so I had a big meal with about 7 Gulab Jamun's (condensed milk soaked in a rose sugar syrup). That night I was sick and couldn't eat anything for days afterwards.

**6) Be careful of too many sweets**

As you can see sweets can be a killer in India. I love them so much and do indulge regularly but it's all about keeping moderation. Also make sure they are fresh and from a good source and avoid deep fried sweets like Jalebi.

**7) Peel fruits**

This goes without saying but only eat fruits that you've peeled yourself. If there is a fruit platter or salad I would recommend avoiding it at all costs. You don't know who cut the fruit and with which knife or for how long has it been sitting in the open air.

**8 ) No salad or juices**

Same goes for salad and juices. The salad is washed with water that is not kosher and juices are made in juicer machines that aren't cleaned properly. I have a friend whose gotten dysentery from a fruit juice that tested his temptations at a five star hotel.

## 9) Clean water

As mentioned earlier. Clean water is of utmost importance. Always drink bottled or boiled water even if the person offering you water swears it is safe and “purified”.

## 10) Don't accept food from strangers

On trains and at temples and other locations there are often chances that apparently “nice” people will offer you food. Sometimes these can be dubious people who have poisoned the food so that you fall asleep and then they will take all your belongings. I like to think that this is a rare occurrence but I have heard multiple accounts of such incidents taking place.

## 11) Careful when visiting someone's home

In India they say “guest is God.” Their hospitality is unmatched anywhere I've been on Earth. Often times you may be invited to a meal at a new friend's house. This can be a wonderful experience, even a highlight of your trip but precaution is wise. The main thing is to not drink their water unless it is bottled and not to overeat. One time I was at a house and ate a delicious meal but ate it kind of quickly. They kept bringing more food and force feeding me chapatis. This was okay but then dessert came along and I decided to decline. Next thing I know the father of the house is force-spoon-feeding me a Gulab Jamun! The only way I survived this was by taking an “Ambimip” pill as soon as I could after the meal. So the moral of the story is to eat sloooooow so that the host can bring you more food without you eating like there's no tomorrow.

## 12) Electrolytes - hydration

As mentioned earlier in the post hydration is definitely an issue. Drink plenty especially if you're outside in the sun. You may need 2 to 3 liters per day to stay at normal hydration levels. I recommend also having electrolytes in your water from time to time to make sure you are absorbing the water. With that said nothing beats the quality of hydration from the electrolyte rich young coconuts but sometimes they aren't available.

## 13) Sun protection

The Indian sun can be very intense even in the Winter time. I have very sensitive skin and could get burnt within 20 minutes! So I wear light colored, long sleeved shirts to avoid too much direct contact with the sun. A broad brimmed hat goes a long way, sunglasses, and sunscreen if you like to use that. Obviously avoiding the midday sun from 10am 'til 4pm is a great way to minimize your risks of getting sunburned.

# Shopping in India - Learn How to Bargain Like an Indian

## 1) How to bargain like an Indian

I would say that Indian's are the best negotiators or bargainers I have ever encountered. They are incredibly good at going for your emotions, very comfortable with numbers and know how to up sell until the cows come home. As soon as an Indian shop owner sees a Westerner his or her eyes usually widen slightly, get a little twinkle of a dollar sign and a big smile on their face and possibly will greet you with "welcome to my shop".

As soon as you touch something then the shop owner knows you're interested. When you ask "how much?" (Hindi – Kitanaa) then the game is on. Almost always the price will be astronomical for us because it seems that Indians believe that all Westerners are loaded with cash even us poor students.

So for example when I asked how much this hoodie was the shop owner said, "2000rs" (US \$40).

I instantly replied, "50rs".

He laughs and says, "no way".

I reply, "100rs".

He says, "1000rs".

I reply, "200rs".

He says, "800rs".

I reply, "300rs".

He says, "700rs".

At this point I say, "too much" and start to leave the shop.

He freaks out and says, "500rs sir! this is best price, I have wife and baby at home".

While standing at the door of the shop I say "400rs is my best price" and start to move away.

He comes running and says "okay deal".



This example illustrates a few things. Firstly, start out very low and quickly go up a little to show that you are prepared to bargain. Don't get fooled by emotional ploys like "my poor family". Walk out and act disinterested. Say, "too much". Hold your ground and be prepared to actually leave and go to another shop. If you want a number items you should be able to bargain a package deal. Another tactic is to make the shop owner show you a lot of merchandise before you even start negotiating. These tips will get you much better prices but chances are you'll still be paying a lot more than the locals.

## 2) Fixed rate shops

I recommend at least having a go at bargaining though I must confess it can be extremely emotionally tiring if you are making many purchases from different stores. If you want to avoid the hassle then it usually is possible to find “fixed rate shops” which means the price on the tag is the price you pay. These guys are generally honest and have good quality items.

## 3) MRP - Maximum Retail Price

On food items like Coca-Cola, snacks and sometimes on clothing there are price tags with “MRP” listed. This is the maximum retail price and a good way to pay a fair price without getting screwed. It is good to look at these prices because often times store owners will try to add on to these prices when you’re not paying attention. For drinks out of the fridge they may try to add a few rupees because of the fact that it’s chilled which is bs in my opinion but they may refuse if you don’t pay it.

## 4) Shop around

If you have the energy I highly recommend shopping around before making large purchases. This way you can get a feel for what the price should be and what is available especially if you’re looking for one of a kind items like jewelry. Conveniently shops are usually grouped together in a certain part of the market. E.g there may be 5 jewelers within a stones through between each other. Similarly with electronics, fruit shops and sweets etc. Another part of shopping around is to buy a small item and bring to another shop to compare and get a “second opinion” on.

## 5) Gandhi Khadi Clothing Stores

In every town there is a Gandhi Khadi store selling local hand-spun fabric that can be tailored into any form you’d like. I love these stores and go there at any chance I get. The word Khadi means cotton and they also have raw silk and woolen items. I like to wear Indian dress when I’m there which entails a kurta (long sleeved shirt with the shirt falling just above the knees) and a dhoti ( a rectangular cloth wrapped at the waist like a dress). So I go to the Gandhi Khadi and get these items custom made and it seriously is the most comfortable clothing I’ve ever worn. For the kurta I go for cotton and for the dhoti I go for raw silk.

## 6) New market vs Old bazaar

In almost every town there is a “New Market” and “Old Bazaar or Market”. The new market is more “trendy” and can be a popular social hangout place for youth. The stores are more modern and also usually more expensive than the equivalent in the old bazaar. The old bazaars are often ancient with quaint, winding streets and little stores all nestled together. I like both but

probably the old bazaar slightly more just because it is more interesting and the prices are better.

# Indian Temples - 11 Tips to Enjoy Your Visit to an Indian Temple

The Indian temples are truly holy. For me they embody pure spirituality, the coexistence of silence and dynamism, point and infinity and divinity. To get the most out of your visit it is very wise to have a guide or at least follow the tips I have below.

## 1) Temple offerings

I recommend buying offerings at the temple grounds whenever you go to temple. This could simply be a 50rs garland (mala) of flowers or could more extravagant with a coconut, milk and of course rupees. These should be offered at the main idol or lingam. There will many “pandits” looking for money and so this is another place where 10rs notes become very useful. At the main inner sanctum you could give 50rs or more depending how you feel but at the little side shrines I give nothing or a maximum 10rs.



## 2) Remove your sandals or shoes

At all temples you will have to leave your sandals or shoes outside. I have found the best place to leave them is at the mala shop where you bought the flowers. Because you are a customer the shop owner will make sure to look after your sandals, just gesture to them so that they know you are leaving them there. Another tactic if you haven't bought any flowers is to separate your shoes so that they are not a pair. Kind of like separating skis when you're on the ski slopes.

## 3) Earplugs

The best thing I ever figured out at a temple was that it is very wise to wear [ear plugs](#). Believe it or not the temples can be some of the most chaotic places in India with loud bells, people screaming, babies crying and guards shoving you through the lines. If you have ear plugs in then the noise is dampened and it is easier to be inward and connect more with the subtle but powerful realms of spirituality.

## 4) Meditation at temples

I find that practicing my Transcendental Meditation at the temples can be an extremely pleasurable experience like nowhere else on Earth. It is important to find a comfortable corner or quiet spot away from the chaos where you think disturbance will be minimal. Again earplugs are a Godsend. If someone asks me to move because I've been there too long or something I simply don't respond and then I seem to become invisible. Being a white boy meditating for extended periods at temples I often become a spectacle with young children grabbing their mother's sari and pointing. This is kind of hilarious but I just keep my eyes closed and go on with my exploration of the spiritual realms. In fact I have had some of my best glimpses into enlightenment at temples and this is certainly a major draw card for me to go to India.



## 5) Be Inward

As I have alluded to above, I highly recommend that you make the temple experience as inward as possible. You may be shocked by the chaos with people pushing and people asking for money etc. I keep my eyes closed as much as possible even when waiting in lines and just be quiet with myself.

## 6) Wear Nice Clothes

Whether you really believe in the spirituality or not I recommend wearing traditional nice clean clothes. This means kurta/ dhoti or pajama for men and a saree or punjabi dress for ladies. In my opinion, going to a temple is like meeting someone very special and so it pays to "dress for success". Also I've found that if I'm wearing traditional clothing I am treated with more respect by the temple priests or even given special treatment. Also no leather is permitted in any temple including wallets and belts so beware.



## 7) Special Darshan - Abhishek

Darshan is crudely translated as “sight” but on a deeper level and in the context of visiting a temple it means “receiving blessings from the divine”. Abhishek is a basic pooja (prayer) that temple priests perform at the statue or lingam. It usually involves offering milk and flowers. If you want the full experience of a temple I recommend going to the “temple office” and purchasing an “abhishek”. This will mean you will get some kind of special darshan and you may even be lucky enough to do the offerings yourself! It also means you get to skip lines which can be great when the wait is hours long.

## 8) Dakshina or Baksheesh

Is the offering or donation of money at a holy place or to a holy person. It is expected that you give something any temple you visit but the amount is really up to you. 10rs would be the minimum and you could give anything more than that if you feel the desire. I like getting the special darshan which usually costs somewhere between 500rs – 1000rs because that way you are making a substantial donation but getting something tangible in return. I have had many wonderful experiences by giving a dakshina for the special darshan.

## 9) Temple Guide

It may be a good idea to get a temple guide especially if it is your first time. This will help you skip some chaotic lines and understand the history and special features of that particular temple. Be sure to agree on a price before the tour begins because it can be astronomical if they try to scam you.



## 10) Different kinds of Temples

As you may be able to imagine there are endless different kinds of temples in India. There is literally some kind of shrine or temple on every street corner. Some temples have a lingam (small rounded stone pillar) at the center and these are for worshipping the Vedic God – Shiva. Others have a statue of the Vedic God like in a Durga temple. While others are cave like with some natural rock formation that has become a place of worship. Depending where you are there may be some different customs observed such as in South India all the temples require the men to take off their shirts.

## 11) Accommodation

I choose my hotels based on their closeness to the temple. I figure that the closer you are the better. My experience is that if you get a hotel right outside the temple you will be in that spiritual aura 24/7 while you're there and so the experience will be deeper and more long lasting. It also means you may be able to leave your valuables and shoes etc in your room which can be very convenient.

This picture on the right is from my hotel room outside the incredible Kanyakumari temple at the Southern tip of India.



# Communication in India - a Tourists Perspective and Tips

## 1) Head Wobble

You have probably heard of the famous Indian head wobble? This subtle gesture is a crucial part of both understanding other people and conveying meaning yourself. It can mean a number of different things depending on the context and degree to which the head is wobbled. The only way to really understand it is to be in India long enough to discern the subtle differences. With that said here are few of my observations: when listening to someone else speak a little wobble usually means you agree with what they are saying or you think it is good, when greeting someone and then doing a wobble is like saying, "it's a pleasure to meet you", when a waiter brings you food and you do a wobble to just one side this is like saying, "thanks", it can also be a "yes" when you've asked a question such as, "is this the right way to the beach?" and lastly it can just be sign of kindness or friendship when someone has made room for you to sit down on the bus or train etc. I actually really like the Indian head wobble and find that it is a very natural form of human communication.

## 2) Communication in general

India has many languages with Hindi being the most widely spoken but only in the Northern part of the country. English is the second official language and is spoken almost everywhere especially in South India. With this said, communication in India can be challenging and can cause many a headache. The main thing is to be open to understanding people based upon body language and gestures as well as strong accents.

## 3) Know a few keywords and phrases

Having a few keywords can mean the difference between night and day with your enjoyment and success with communicating in India. I have found that knowing these few words gives me more respect and authority and the locals are generally very happy to see me trying. Knowing these keywords also help with your safety. For example knowing the word for "stop", "no" and "slow down" can save your life!

## 4) Have patience

Lastly, I highly recommend having patience while attempting to communicate in India. Sometimes it can be frustrating and really annoying when someone keeps saying "yes" to every question you ask. Having patience allows you to not get angry too quickly and to sort out the situation – eventually. It's always helpful to find someone who speaks your language well and

have them be a translator. This has happened to me many times when I'm in some argument with a taxi driver or shop owner when up walks someone who speaks perfect English to explain and interpret for both parties. Another strategy that has worked really well for me is to call an Indian friend, tell them the situation and then pass the phone to the person who you are having trouble with.

## 5) Common English phrases spoken by the Indians

**"Your good name sir?"** – a stranger will often come up to you and ask this question. They are always curious to hear the Western names.

**"Which country?"** – the next question after "your good name sir?" is usually "which country?". Indians love meeting people from far off lands and are intrigued by our travels and fascination with India.

**"No problem"** – this phrase is often very annoyingly said when there is an actual problem that you are raising but the person on the other end says, "no problem!". It can also be quite funny if you aren't in a dire situation...

**"Fine sir"** – a common phrase when you ask a question like, "how are you?".

**"Hello sir"** – random shop owners will often say this as you walk by to try and get your attention to come into their shop. I recommend just walking straight ahead without responding otherwise you'll likely get mauled by ten other shop owners 😊

**"Yes"** – this often means "no" but if someone is trying to sell you something then they will say yes to everything. It can be rather frustrating but it will quickly let you know if the person is trustworthy or not.

**"Hello"** – on the phone "hello" doesn't only mean "hello" it also means "I don't understand", "are you there", "what" and "say it again." I have had a number of hilarious conversations with hotel receptionists where they keep saying hello because they understand my question.

## 6) An example of funny communication

In 2010 I was staying at a hotel in Tirupati. One morning I woke up and felt like some Kitchari (rice and lentils) for breakfast so I called the room service guy.

I say, "hello, can I please get some kitchari for breakfast"

The man answered, "hello"

I reply, "hello, yes"

He says, "what do you want?"

I answer, "can I get kitchari?"

Him: "hello?"

Me: "Kitchari?"

Him: "Ne, kitchari not possible"

Me: "Okay I will get upma and pongal"

I realized that it seems the meaning of "hello" in India has become "I don't understand what you're asking" or "that's nonsense can you say something else." 😊 It can be very frustrating or extremely funny depending how you're feeling at the time...

# Pictures of India & 6 Tips to Become a Better Photographer

## 1) Early morning/ late afternoon

A general principle in photography is that the light is best 1 hour after sunrise and 1 hour before sunset everyday. This is particularly true in India because the sun is very intense. The midday sun will generally cause very harsh shadows and not very ideal lighting. These times of day are also the best for being outdoors and for going on a nice stroll. Most of my favorite photos from India were all taken at these times of day.

## 2) Tripod

The one problem with shooting in low light around dawn and dusk is that you are likely to have slow shutter speeds. To overcome this I recommend having a tripod of some kind even if it is a tiny travel one. Alternatively you can often find a rock, pillar or railing to help you out.



## 3) People

Photographing people is something that I really enjoy but often am shy to do so. One way I've gotten around this is to photograph from a car. Most of the time people don't realize that you're taking photos and if they do, the car has already moved on before anything can be said. I have taken some really cool shots via this method. [Here is a recent blog I posted with 108 faces from the Mahakumbha Mela.](#)

## 4) Landscapes

My all time favorite subject for photography is landscapes. India has amazing diversity in it's colors and landscapes from mountains to beaches and from jungles to deserts. Along with the rich history of architecture and civilization it makes for eye candy in almost every turn one makes. Again photographing around twilight is ideal for landscapes and a tripod is a must so that you can put your aperture to have a high F stop so that the depth-of-field is maximized.



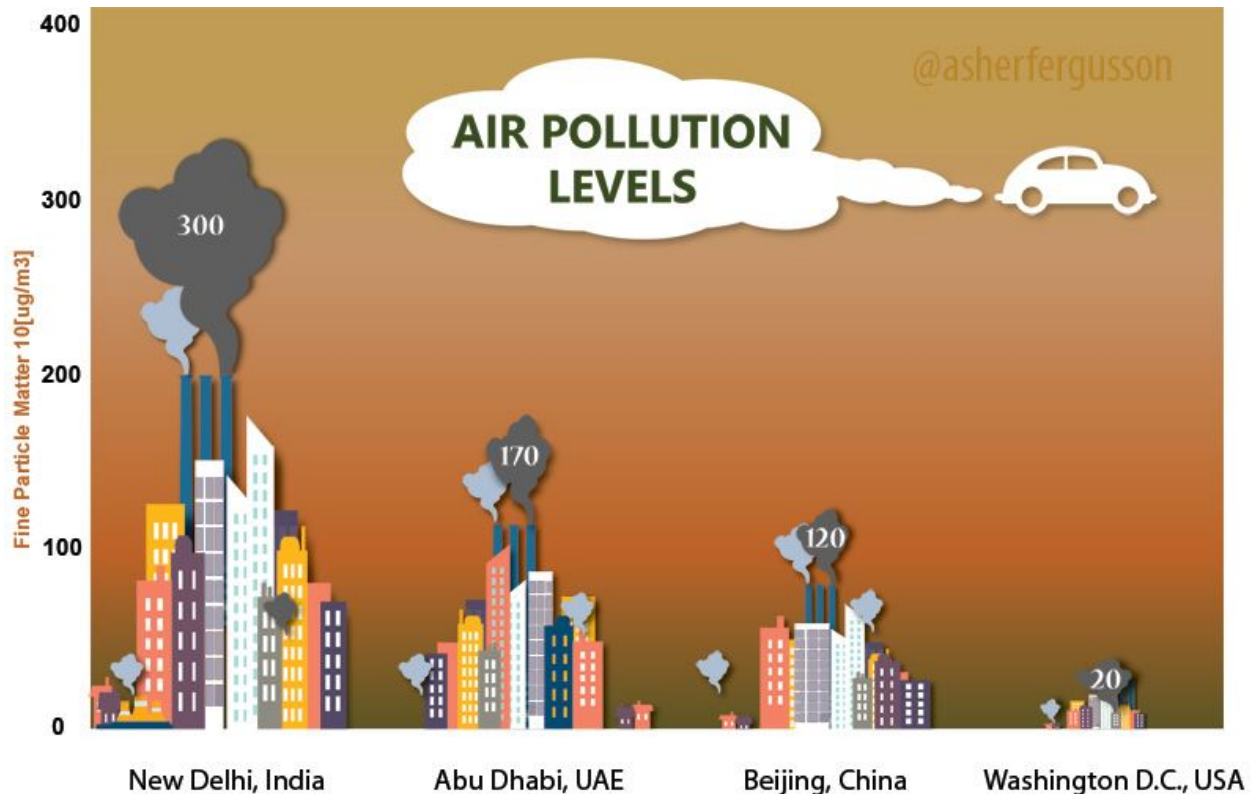
## 5) Unusual angles

As with all photography, unusual angles can often make a shot. Especially if it's a familiar iconic tourist place such as the Taj Mahal. If you can be creative, walk around and scope out some kind of unusual angle you can often get a breathtaking shot that surprises the viewer and delights their eyes.

## 6) Funny signs and scenes

India is filled with hilarious signs and scenes that are completely foreign and novel for the Western mind. I have seen things that absolutely blew my mind such as: a truck overladen so much so that the steel body of the back is almost touching the wheels, or two men on a motorcycle carrying an entire bed frame! Being ready at any moment is crucial to capture such moments and having your camera settings prepared for fast motion is often helpful. If you have anything you'd like to add or comment on please do so below.

# Pollution in India - A tourist's perspective



Source:  World Health Organization

## 1) Burning plastic

Unfortunately poor people are often burning all kinds of strange toxic things such as plastic in order to stay warm at night. This is mostly confined to cities and during the winter time. It can be so obnoxious that it is asphyxiating! In Chennai I was in a cheap hotel that didn't have AC and I woke every night coughing uncontrollably. So I highly recommend avoiding cities as much as possible in the winter time which is December through mid February.

## 2) Smoke

Similar to the plastic there are plenty of other things being burned in the winter. Common fuels are cow dung and wood which are used for cooking and for staying warm. These fuels can cause a lot of smoke and pollution in the air which again can be asphyxiating.

### 3) Exhaust fumes

With the explosion of vehicles on the Indian roads there is a gigantic amount of pollution from exhaust fumes. In the cities it can be incessant and I highly recommend bringing some kind of filter to breath through like a silk shawl.

Whole country blanketed in smog even over the ocean off the Southern tip. I know this from flying planes all over the country.

Last but not least!

As I mentioned, I highly recommend getting the latest [India Lonely Planet](#) book before you go because it's like a bible that gives all the insider tips of the most popular (and not so popular) locations around India. Often times Internet is not available in India and this book replaces the need for looking up hotels online etc.

[Click here to buy it on Amazon!](#)

