

Spiritual India

HINDU SACRED SITES



Varanasi



VARANASI UTTAR PRADESH

The temple-choked city of Varanasi is the most sacred place in the world for hindus - comparable to what Jerusalem means for christians, or Mecca for muslims. It is located on the Ganges River in northern India, in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

According to Mark Twain, Varanasi "is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together."

The legend Mr Twain refers to says that the city was founded 5,000 years ago by Shiva. Many localities in the city, especially near the sacred Ganges River, are associated with Shiva and other hindu deities and as such are the locus of pilgrimage and veneration. Over 1 million hindu pilgrims annually visit the city, itself having about 1,5 million inhabitants.



Varanasi

The hindu faithful believe that bathing in the Ganges in Varanasi wipes clean sins, and that dying in the city guarantees release from the cycle of reincarnation.

Similar to Jerusalem, Varanasi is holy to more than one faith: buddhists stream into the city where the Buddha gave his first sermon, and jains revere it as the birthplace of one of their teachers.

HARIDWAR UTTARAKHAND



Haridwar

Har, Har Gange! This celebratory exhortation has been the cry of the devout from time immemorial, shouted with gusto while taking a plunge of faith into the pleasantly cold waters of jeevan dayini (the giver of life), moksha prayini (bestower of salvation) Ganga at Haridwar. Visiting a temple is in itself secondary here. The age-old ritual of taking a bath in the fast-flowing holy river takes precedence over everything else for pilgrims.

The hypnotic beauty of the Ganga seems to bring time to a standstill. Most visitors stop by here en route to a longer stay in upstream Rishikesh. Haridwar, however, remains the base for those with ritual commitments. Haridwar is the embodiment of fervour and energy.

RISHIKESH UTTARAKHAND

A three-fold importance is attached to this town. First, since Satyug, Rishikesh has been the abode of sages. Second, Rishikesh is considered the gateway to the Char Dham and Panch Kedar yatras. Third, during the past few decades, Rishikesh has become the yoga capital of the world.

The town stands on both banks of the Ganges. There is free access to the unpolluted waters and the water temperature is just perfect, cool in summer and bearably cold in winter. The undercurrents of spirituality are as steady here as the flow of the mighty Ganges.

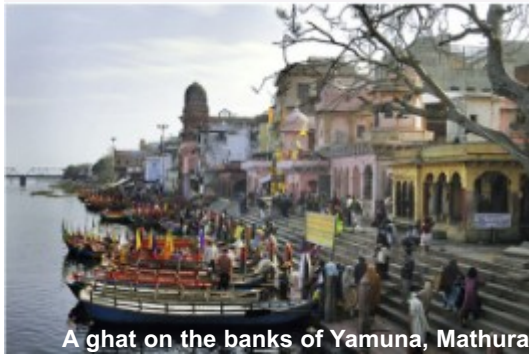


Rishikesh

MATHURA UTTAR PRADESH

A holy town that is renowned as the birthplace of Lord Krishna, Mathura is a most favoured devout center in India. This sacred place boasts of numerous serene theerthams, which are popularly called as ghats. Now the city has 25 ghats and each of them is connected with Lord Krishna in one way or the other.

Devotees believe that a holy dip and performance of some rituals and poojas would retrieve them from their evil deeds. Among the numerous ghats, those that are scattered towards the north are called Vishram Ghats and towards the south are called Moksha Ghats. It is conventional that the devotee should visit all the 25 ghats to end up their pilgrimage of Mathura.



A ghat on the banks of Yamuna, Mathura

VRINDAVAN UTTAR PRADESH

Vrindavan holds an important place in the Hindu mythology; it is the place where Lord Krishna spent most of his childhood. The believers and the devotees still see the Lord dancing and playing in the garden of Vrindavan. It is believed that Lord Krishna was raised there in the cow-herding village of Gokula by his foster parents. Vrindavan is today famous for its numerous temples-both old and new. Considered to be the abode of Lord Krishna, it is one of India's most holiest cities with more than 5000 temples dedicated to Lord Krishna.



A woman applying a tika on her forehead on the Ghats in Vrindavan

ALLAHABAD UTTAR PRADESH

Allahabad is another old city that is much revered for its mythical connotations. It is also called "Prayag" because Brahma once performed a sacrifice here. The main reason why this place has acquired such religious merit is because it is the confluence of three rivers – Ganga, Jamuna and Sarasvati. This is a very old Hindu tradition. Wherever in India two or three rivers come to meet that place has been declared holy and temples and other religious institutions have



Sadhus proceeding to Ganges, Allahabad

been built. Pilgrims flock to these places to bathe at the confluences and purify themselves of all previous sins. Allahabad is also the place where the most important Kumbh Mela takes place. It is also dotted with temples and other religious institutions. It is an old center of Hindu learning and still continues with the grand old tradition.

UJJAIN MADHYA PRADESH

According to the Aranya-parva of the Mahabharata, Ujjain is one of the seven sacred cities in India known as moksapuris or sapta-puris. Ujjain is situated on the bank of the Shipra River, which is one of the western most tributaries of the Ganges. On the banks of two small rivulets - the Saraswati and the Khan. Every year, thousand of pilgrims trickle in to worship the Mahakaleswar Linga in an old temple by the Shipra River. Mahakaleswar means "God of Eternal Time). Mahakal is eternal time that ultimately obliterates everything, reminiscent of Shiva's role as sustainer of the universe against the depredations of time. This idol is again a very powerful draw for devotees who come to offer homage to Shiva and ask for his blessings.



Laid back Ujjain evening

OMKARESHWAR MADHYA PRADESH

Omkareshwar is an island, shaped like the holy Hindu symbol of 'OM'. Thousands of pilgrims gather at this holy city to offer prayers to the Jyotirlingam (one of the twelve throughout India), at the Shiva temple of Shri Omkar Mandhata. The jyotirlingam and the shape of the island combine to increase the religious importance of the island for devout Hindus.



Omkareshwar

BADRINATH UTTARAKHAND

"There are several sacred shrines in heaven, on earth, and in hell; but there is no shrine like Badrinath." - Skanda Purana. Several venerated pilgrimage sites dot the foothills and the peaks of the Himalayas, but the most noteworthy is Badrinath. The temple of Shri Badrinathji on the banks of the Alaknanda River dates back to the vedic times. Built by the renowned 8th century philosopher and saint, Adi Guru Shankaracharya, the temple is situated at an altitude of 3,133 meters. The main attraction is a one meter tall black stone image of Vishnu, as Lord Badri Narayan. The statue depicts Vishnu sitting in meditative posture, rather than his far more typical reclining pose. The best time to visit Badrinath is between June and September.



Badrinath Temple

KEDARNATH UTTARAKHAND

Kedarnath is revered as one of the holiest pilgrimage destinations in India. Situated at an altitude of 3,584 m, the holy town of Kedarnath overlooks the Kedar Massif, a stunning mountain formation with several glaciers, including the source of the Mandakini River. The shrine of Kedarnath is reached by a 14 km trek uphill from Gaurikund. It houses one of the 12 holy Jyotirlingam, in which Lord Shiva is manifest. Built more than thousand years ago, this temple can be visited only during some months of the year. Besides being an important pilgrim centre, Kedarnath offers the traveller stunning vistas of lofty snow peaks, rivers and the green meadows.



Kedarnath Temple

GANGOTRI UTTARAKHAND

Gangotri is the source of the River Ganga and is located high up in the Himalayas at 3048 meters above sea-level. The glacier of the same name begins to melt here. The water comes out a rock formation shaped like a cow's mouth and this has great religious significance as the cow is held sacred by Hindus.



Gaumukh, source of Ganges, Gangotri

Also, in the water just below the cow's mouth fountain, there is submerged in the ice-cold water a stone shaped like a Linga. This is held even more auspicious as the mythical story of Shiva cushioning the Ganga's fall as it descends to earth is borne out by this singular natural formation.

Gangotri is not only a pilgrimage spot but it is also much favored by hardy mountaineers who use it as a base for more adventurous ascents on the towering peaks nearby. The pristine mountains and ample vegetation is savored by pilgrims and adventurers alike.

YAMUNOTRI UTTARAKHAND



Yamunotri Temple

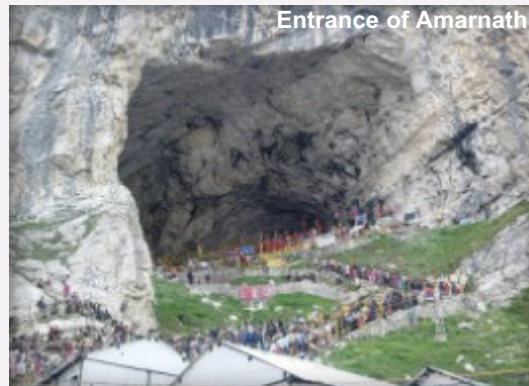
Yamunotri is the glacial source of the River Jamuna, another holy river much associated with Krishna who was born in Mathura on its banks. There are many holy places around this high altitude (3293 meters) religious spot. Most of them are holy lakes, rock formations and river sources that have mythical connotations. The ascent to this place is tough and only those pilgrims who are physically fit can make it up to here.

This pilgrimage spot is also favored alike by pilgrims and adventurers. The Yamunotri Temple is dedicated to the River Goddess and is the main focus of worship.

AMARNATH JAMMU & KASHMIR

The pilgrimage site of Amarnath is actually a large cave, 150 feet high and 90 feet long, found at an elevation of 4,175 meters in the mountains 145 Km east of Srinagar in the state of Kashmir. Inside the cave are some ice formations that look like various gods in the Hindu pantheon. The largest of this is a Shiva Linga which is Lord Amarnath (the Lord of the Immortal). Other ice formations are said to look like Ganesha, Parvati and Bhairava, an aspect of Shiva, and all are respectfully worshipped. The main Linga grows and diminishes in size with the seasons and even with the waxing and waning of the moon.

The Amarnath Yatra, they say, leaves a profound impact of spiritual exaltation on the minds of the pilgrims, who stride through an exceedingly enchanting and enthralling route "upward" to meet the shining glory and greatness of God. Swami Vivekananda recounting his Amarnath experience said, "I have never been to anything so beautiful, so inspiring."



Entrance of Amarnath

DWARKA GUJARAT

Dwarka is as old as the history of India. It was the seat of Sri Krishna after he quit Mathura, his maternal home, to come and reign here. Since it has been held as holy for a long time it has gradually accumulated, over the years, a large number of religious monuments and institutions that today make it one of the most revered spots in Hinduism.

The main Dham temple houses Ranchhodji, another name for Lord Krishna who time and often fled from the battlefield under unfavorable circumstances to return again another day and win. "Ran" means "War" while "Chod" means "Running away". There is also a temple to Lord Krishna's wife Rukmini, who is believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmi.



Dwarkadish Temple, Dwarka

SOMNATH GUJARAT

The town of Veraval in the western parts of the state of Gujarat is another Jyotirlinga spot. Shiva is called Somnath here and the temple is an imposing ancient rock structure that, by itself, induces reverence. Somnath is another very powerful pilgrimage spot for Hindus and they flock in large numbers to get Darshan (a view) of Shiva here.

Destroyed six times during the 8th to the 18th cent., the current structure is the seventh version of the Somnath temple.



Somnath Temple

PUSHKAR RAJASTHAN

Now a haven for travellers from all over the world, the holy lake in Pushkar still attracts Hindu pilgrims from all over India. There are many temples and ashrams here to compliment the numerous ghats and you will see many Sadhus (holy men). Of all the thousands of temples in India, only one is dedicated to Brahma, and that is located here in Pushkar.

The best time to visit this tiny oasis town is during 'Kartik Poonima', which is when the yearly camel festival is held. This is said to be the biggest camel fair in the world with thousands of animals brought here from all over India and beyond, to be bought and sold. There are parades and all kinds of entertainments in the town for three days at the height of the festival.



Pushkar

NASHIK MAHARASHTRA

The city has developed on both the banks of Godavari which divides the city into almost equal halves. The History of the city dates back to Ramayana. There are many references of the city in many epics as well as vedas. The banks or Ghats on the Godavari at Nashik are considered to be sacred. It is believed that all the Sins are washed out by taking Holy dip in the Kundas (Ponds) constructed in the river. Also by performing the last rites, Moksha is attained by the deceased soul.



Godavari Sangam, Nashik

PURI ORISSA



Jagannath Rath Yatra, Puri

The holy city of Lord Jagannath is situated on the sea shore of the Bay of Bengal in Orissa. Puri owes its existence to the great temple of Jagannath. The sanctity of Puri as an important centre of pilgrimage is of remote antiquity.

The Jagannath worship at Puri is an assimilation of divergent modes of worship of different religions, creeds and sects. In the daily rituals and annual festivals of Sri Jagannath temple at Puri, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Saivite, Shakta, Tantric and Vaishnavite influences are clearly discernible. The cult of Jagannath is an epitome of divergent religious creeds and schools of philosophy.

TIRUPATI ANDHRA PRADESH



Tirupati Venkateswera Temple, Tirupati

Tirupati/Tirumala is a pilgrimage center of great significance and is visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims throughout the year. Venkateswara, or Srinivasa or Balaji as the presiding deity Vishnu is known, is enshrined in this temple, located on a range of the Eastern Ghats, called the Seven Hills. It is an ancient temple and its glory has been sung by the saints of the yesteryears. Said to be the richest temple in India, this temple is a vibrant cultural and philanthropic institution with a grand history spanning several centuries. It attracts pilgrims from all over the country and it is not unusual for pilgrims to stand in line for hours together to obtain a glimpse of the presiding deity for a few fleeting seconds.

MADURAI TAMIL NADU

Madurai, also known as Temple City, is the second largest city of Tamil Nadu situated on the banks of River Vaigai. Madurai was planned and laid out in the pattern of a lotus flower, with the famous Meenakshi Temple in the centre. Legend says the city was founded by the Pandya King Kulasekera, and that in the 10th century it was captured by the Chola emperors. The Pandys regained their independence in the 12th century. The local people still live by the same set of 2000-year-old Hindu rules.

There are an estimated 10,000 pilgrims in the city on any given day, and the most visited place is the Meenakshi Temple, with its towers dominating the skyline. Its Dravidian architecture is typically covered with coloured images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythical figures.



Meenakshi Temple, Madurai

KANCHIPURAM TAMIL NADU

Kanchipuram is one of the most sacred cities in India. It has a unique temple architecture that is breathtaking and of interest not only to the Hindu pilgrim but also to general tourists who come to stare at and admire the towering stone structures intricately carved from foot to spire.

Kanchipuram is a major Shakti worship spot together with its neighboring city Madurai. The Shakti deity at Kanchipuram is Kamakshi while the one at Madurai is Meenakshi. These two Deities, together with Lady Vishalakshmi of Kashi, make up a sort of trinity of Shakti Deities in Southern India. As a Shakti worship spot, the attendant Shiva temples are also quite spectacular and are the Kailashnath Temple and the Ekambareswar Temple. Also resident in the city is a Vishnu temple – Varadaraja Temple.



Kailasanath Temple, Kanchipuram

RAMESHWARAM TAMIL NADU

Rameshwaram is the only one of the four Dhams where the resident Deity is Lord Shiva. The other three have either Vishnu in one form or one of His avatars in residence. The temple is built on the site where Lord Rama, Vishnu's seventh avatar, worshipped Shiva prior to his attack on Lankapuri, the capital city of the Rakshasas to rescue his beloved wife Sita who had been abducted by Ravana, king of the Rakshasas.

The temple has additional significance because it is, firstly, a Jyotirlinga, and secondly, it is said in the scriptures that a pilgrimage to Varanasi to pay homage to Lord Vishwanath is incomplete without also paying homage to Lord Ranganatha at Rameshwaram. Rameshwaram is also called the "Varanasi of the South".

Pilgrims familiar with the "Ramayana", written almost 3,000 years ago, find significance in many landmarks about the place. One of the most significant of these is the Gandhamardhan Parvat (a hill) on top of which Rama's footprint is still found embedded in a rock at the topmost portion of the mountain. There are also other places of interest to the devout pilgrim and this is a favorite spot to cleanse one's soul if one is a Hindu.



Corridor of Ramnathswamy Temple, Rameshwaram

KANYAKUMARI TAMIL NADU

Kanyakumari is at the very tip of the Indian Subcontinent as it projects into the sea in the utmost south. It is actually a cape where the waters of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea meet. It is a picturesque tourism spot and has a plethora of temples making it an ideal place to savour the best of both worlds – the lower and the upper.

The Kumari Temple is situated at a strategic place where the three waters meet. Legend has it that when Shiva was unmarried Devi resolved to get his hand through extreme penance but was unsuccessful and decided to remain a virgin (Kumari) all her life. The other significant Shakti deity here is Devi Bhagavati. Her temple is located at an even more picturesque spot near the Kumari temple.

Also at Kanyakumari is the unique Suchindram Temple where the Linga is a symbol of the triad of Hinduism – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The Linga is called Sthanumalaya – the top is Sthanu (Shiva), the middle Mal (Vishnu) and the bottom Ayan or Brahma. This is one of the few places in India where the triad is worshipped at one place in one temple.

A recent relatively addition to Kanyakumari's religious spectrum has been the Vivekananda Shrine daringly built on an outcrop of rock in the middle of the waters.



Kanyakumari