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General Information about India

capital city:	New Delhi (population 295,000)
area:	3,287,590 sq km
population:	1.14 billion
language:	Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, Kashmiri, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, English
currency:	Indian Rupee (INR)
time zone:	GMT +5.5
dialing code:	+91
daylight savings begins:	No DST
daylight savings ends:	No DST
electricity:	Type C (European 2-pin), Type D (Old British 3-pin), Type M (see D),

Intrepid Information on India

times to go

There is a huge amount of variation in India's climate. Generally the best time to visit most of the country is September to March which is when temperatures are at their coolest. During winter (December-January) temperatures can get quite cold in Delhi and the north, especially at night.

The monsoon is from late-May to around October. During this time it can be unpleasantly hot and humid, although it is the best time to visit Ladakh and the hills.

accommodation

- Chosen where possible for their character and location, Intrepid's Indian hotels are clean and comfortable without providing too many fancy frills.
- Small, family run guesthouses, modern business style hotels and converted minor palaces and merchant houses are all used.
- The rooms are fan cooled and twin bedded with private facilities, this normally means western style but occasionally Asian style toilets.

- Hot water is often provided from individual room heaters (most hotels have Geysers fitted in bathrooms to supply hot water), so make sure you turn them on when entering your room.
- Rooms will occasionally have a television for you to catch up on the latest Hindi movies but (unless you are travelling Comfort style) will not have hair dryers or mini bars.
- On occasions it may be necessary to use multi share accommodation
- In the more remote areas the accommodation can be very basic often with primitive bathroom/toilet facilities.
- Although equipped with electricity and hot water things in India don't always go to plan and you might find there are interruptions or difficulties with plumbing. A sense of humour is essential.

transport

Trains

- Traveling by train is one of the great experiences of India. It's a system, which looks like chaos, but it works, and well. Trains are often late of course, sometimes by hours rather than minutes, but they do run, and with amazing efficiency too.
- Journeys frequently last twelve hours or more which allows us the opportunity to meet people from all the different echelons of Indian society
- We use a variety of train classes
- The faster day trains will often be air-conditioned and have reclining, padded individual seats
- Sleeper carriages can be crowded during the day but between 9pm and 6am anyone with a bunk reservation is entitled to exclusive use of their bunk.
- When traveling overnight, always padlock your bag to your bunk; an attached chain is usually provided beneath the seat of the lower bunk.
- For most train journeys we use second class reserved carriages, normally fan cooled though not always air-conditioned.
- Each partitioned unit has padded sleeping berths for 6 people, which become seating during the day.

Buses

- Have you ever wondered how it would be to travel on a bus where people travel packed to the gunnels, with their livestock and luggage and cover most routes with missing windows and doors. Travelling on these buses is a great way to interact with the locals, but remember that you may not get a seat!
- Maintenance to Indian buses is very creative and buses have a long shelf life.
- On the major routes buses are more modern and in some cases it is even possible to reserve seats.
- Smaller private bus companies may be only semi-legal and have little backup in case of breakdown.
- On state-run buses, you can usually squeeze your luggage into an unobtrusive corner, although you may sometimes be requested to have it travel on the roof

Rickshaws

- The auto-rickshaw, that most Indian of vehicles, is the front half of a motor-scooter with a couple of seats mounted on the back. These three-wheeled vehicles are by far the best way to get around the larger cities. Noisy, suspension and their drivers often rather reckless, but that's all part of the fun
- Slower and cheaper still is the cycle rickshaw - basically a glorified tricycle. The same as for autos but they move slower and are peddled by the driver - great way of helping the locals earn their livelihood since cycle rickshaw-wallahs are invariably emaciated pavement dwellers who earn only a pittance for their pains. In the end, though, to deny them your custom on those grounds is spurious logic; they will earn even less if you don't use them, and are one of the most ecofriendly mode of transports.

events

Public Holidays 2010

- **26 Jan** Republic Day
- **Feb/Mar** Mahashivratri (date to be confirmed)
- **26 Feb** Milad-Un-Nabi (Birth of the Prophet)
- **Apr** Mahavir Jayanthi (date to be confirmed)
- **2 Apr** Good Friday
- **5 Apr** Easter Monday
- **28 Apr** Buddha Purnima
- **Aug** Janmashtami (date to be confirmed)
- **15 Aug** Independence Day
- **10-11 Sep** Id ul Fitr (End of Ramadan)

- **2 Oct** Mahatma Ghandi's Birthday
- **Sep/Oct** Dussehra (Vijaya Dashami)
- **2 Nov** Guru Nanak's Birthday
- **5 Nov** Deepavali or Diwali (Festival of Lights)
- **16-17 Nov** Idu-I Zuha/Bakrid (Feast of the Sacrifice)
- **7 Dec** Muharram (Islamic New Year)
- **25 Dec** Christmas Day
- **26 Dec** Boxing Day

Most Public Holidays are observed on a regional basis. Only the secular holidays of Republic Day, Independence Day and Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday are universally observed. Muslim festivals are timed according to local sightings of various phases of the moon and the dates given above are approximations.

According to: www.worldtravelguide.net/country/120/public_holidays/Indian-Subcontinent/India.html

food & drink

Meals

- Indian food has a deserved reputation throughout the world for being aromatic and delicious
- With a large number of Hindus and Muslims, you will find beef and pork hard to come by except in the Christian areas such as Goa and near Tibet
- What is called 'mutton' on menus normally means goat
- Broadly speaking there are four types of eating establishments - dhabas and bhojanalayas, restaurants, tourist restaurants, and fast-food joints.
- Dhabas and bhojanalayas are cheap Indian dinners. Often found along the sides of highways, dhabas traditionally cater to truck drivers, and you can tell the good ones by the number of trucks parked out front. Bhojanalayas are common in the north of the country. These eating establishments can be a bit grubby so look around before you commit yourself. They have the advantage though of being dirt cheap.
- Restaurants vary in price and quality and offer a wide choice of dishes
- Deluxe restaurants such as those in five-star hotels can be expensive by Indian standards but they offer a chance to try classic Indian cooking of very high quality, and still a fraction of the price you'd pay for such delights at home. Try a meal in at least one.
- If you are lucky enough to be invited into someone's home you will get to taste the most authentically Indian food of all. Most Indian women are professional cooks and housewives, trained from childhood by mothers, grandmothers and aunties, and aided by daughters and nieces. They can quite easily spend a whole day cooking, grinding and mixing the spices themselves, and using only the freshest ingredients.
- Indian sweets are usually made of milk and tend to be very sweet
- Ice cream is popular and can be found in parlours as well as from uniformed men pushing carts around.

Drinks

- India seems to run on tea or chai grown in Darjeeling, Assam and the Nilgiri Hills and sold by chai-wallahs on just about every street corner.
- Tea is usually made by putting tea dust, milk and water in a pan, boiling it all up, straining it into a cup or glass with lots of sugar and pouring back and forth from one cup to another to stir. Ginger and cardamom are often added.
- In the south coffee is just as common as tea and far better quality than in the north. The India Coffee House chain can be found in almost every town. A whole ritual is attached to the drinking of milky Keralan coffee in particular, poured in flamboyant sweeping motions between tall glasses to cool it down.
- India's greatest cold drink is the lassi, made with beaten curd and drunk either sweetened with sugar, salted or mixed with fruit. It varies widely from smooth and delicious to insipid and watery and is sold at virtually every cafe, restaurant and canteen in the country.
- Freshly made milkshakes are also commonly available at establishments with blenders.
- Fruit juice is also widely available and is usually made from fruit, water and sugar liquidised and strained. Street vendors sell fresh fruit juice and often add salt and garam masala.
- For hygiene reasons you should exercise great caution in deciding where to buy food and drinks
- Alcohol prohibition is no longer as widely enforced as it once was. Some states retain partial prohibition in the form of 'dry' days, high taxes, restrictive licences and health warnings on labels ("Liquor - ruins country, family and life" reads Tamil Nadu's). Even in areas where alcohol is readily

- available, dry days are often observed once a week (usually Thursday) and liquor shops remain shut.
- Beer is widely available, though expensive by local standards. Kingfisher and Black Label are the leading local brands although there are plenty of others.
- Lagers tend to contain chemical additives including glycerin but are pretty palatable if you can get them cold
- In some unlicensed restaurants beer comes in the form of 'special tea' - a teapot of beer which you pour into and drink from a teacup to disguise what it really is.
- Toddy (palm wine) is a cheaper and often delicious alternative to beer in Kerala
- In the Himalaya the Bhotia people, of Tibetan background, drink chang (a beer made from millet) and one of the nicest drinks of all - tumba - where fermented millet is placed in a bamboo flask and topped with hot water, then sipped through a bamboo pipe
- Spirits usually take the form of 'Indian Made Foreign Liquor' although the recently legitimised foreign liquor industry is expanding rapidly. Some Scotch such as Seagram's Hundred Pipers is now being bottled in India and sold at a premium, as is Smirnoff vodka.
- Some brands of Indian whisky are not too bad and fairly affordable. Gin and brandy can be pretty rough, while Indian rum is sweet and distinctive.
- In Goa, feni is a spirit distilled from coconut or cashew fruit.
- Steer well clear of illegally distilled arak which often contains methanol (wood alcohol) and other poisons.
- Legal drinking ages vary from 18-25 depending on the state

Vegetarians

- Vegetarians should have no trouble in India
- Indians are used to special dietary requirements (Hindus don't eat beef, Muslims don't eat pork, Buddhists are vegetarian, etc) so they will be accepting of your requirements and willing to help you

communication:

Email

- There are cyber cafes in most of the big metro cities that we visit
- Internet connections are unreliable in the smaller villages
- If you wish to use the internet you will usually be asked for a photocopy of your passport

Telephone

- If you wish to purchase a local sim card, you will need to bring some passport photographs for proof of identity. You can purchase a prepaid sim card easily from an AIRTEL or a VODAFONE shop and phone calls are relatively inexpensive.
- The other option is calling from phone booths that have **ISD** (INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIBER DIALING) or **STD** (SUBSCRIBER TRUNK DIALING) facility available and the rates may vary from place to place.

Post

- Receiving post is not convenient as we are usually doing something or travelling during the opening hours of most post offices
- Mail to international destinations takes around a week

what to buy

- Shopping can be done in shopping centres, stores, or markets
- Each region is famous for different items but fabrics, silverware, carpets and leatherwork should top your list
- Bargaining is expected
- Look for silks from Varanasi, cotton in Rajasthan and Chennai and woollen items from Kashmir
- India has a large carpets industry with those from Darjeeling being particularly good
- Tailor-made clothing can be made quickly and cheaply in some shops
- Indian silverwork is well-regarded internationally and Hyderabad is also famous for pearls
- Other items to look for include woodwork, spices, tea, perfumes, soap, handmade paper and musical instruments
- Check with your local customs officials to ensure that you are able to import some items back into your home country. Australia and New Zealand for example have strict quarantine laws.
- It is prohibited to export from India antiques, art more than 100 years old and any items made from

animal skins.

culture

People

- The majority religion in India is Hindu, followed by Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Parsis.
- Indians will be curious about you and why you are in India and may stare and ask lots of questions
- Couples should be aware that public displays of affection are frowned upon
- Indians will often have different attitudes to time, privacy, and service. A sense of humour and a little patience are essential attributes.
- Eating, offering and taking things, or greeting people should all be done with the right hand as the left hand is considered unclean.

Dress

- Men and women should dress conservatively and keep knees and shoulders covered
- Shorts are acceptable in beach areas but should not be worn outside of those areas
- A sarong is a useful item to have as it is lightweight and cool and can be used to cover up

Toilets:

- Toilets in India are mix of squat style, western style, and 'compromise style' where they are raised from the ground but have flat sides on the seat for squatting on
- If you pay to use a restroom you can expect it to be reasonably clean but no so for free restrooms
- Paper is rarely provided. It is a good idea to carry some with you

Smoking:

- Smoking is banned in restaurants and hotels

handy links

www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/india

www.incredibleindia.org

reading

No Full Stops in India by Mark Tully

The Great Mughals by Bamber Gascoine

Freedom at Midnight by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre

In Rajasthan by Royina Grewal

City of Djinnns by William Dalrymple

Holy Cow by Sarah MacDonald

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistr

Shantaram by Gregory David Robert

A Suitable Boy by Vikram Set

May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons by Elizabeth Bumiller

Such a Long Journey by Rohinton Mistry

Discovery of India by Jawahar Lal Nehru

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

The Story of My Experiments with Truth by Mahatma Gandhi