

# India

## Saris and spirituality: Religion in India



Embark on a journey where you and your students discover the intoxicating cultural cocktail formed by India's three great religions. It is a journey that will take you from bustling cities to the foothills of the Himalaya. India is truly one of the world's most colourful and diverse countries and over the course of ten days we showcase its highlights as we meet with Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists to discover the similarities and differences in their approach to religion. This in-depth trip includes Amritsar, the holiest city for the Sikh people and the centre of Sikhism; Dharamsala - a hilltop Buddhist retreat full of monasteries, prayer flags and monks in crimson robes, and finally two days of meditation and yoga as we experience a Hindu Ashram. It promises to be a memorable journey of adventure and spirituality.



### Recommended itinerary

Culture shock rating: 

Physical rating: 

#### Day 1/2: Depart UK / Arrival in Delhi

Depart UK on overnight flight. We are met on arrival. After checking in to a city hotel and freshening up, we relax a while before embarking on the Old City tour. We'll head out on a rickshaw ride in Chandni Chowk seeing typical Indian market scenes and the old spice bazaar. Later we continue our tour as we visit Nizammuddin Dargah, the Akshardham temple, Birla temple, Jama Masjid and the Lotus Temple.

#### Day 3: Amritsar

We take a short flight to Amritsar, situated in the heart of the rich fertile plain known as India's breadbasket. Amritsar is the holiest city for Sikhs and the centre of Sikhism. Here, we head out to the India-Pakistan border to witness the pomp and circumstance of the daily flag ceremony - a military practice that the security forces of India and Pakistan have followed since 1959. This ceremony takes place every evening before sunset at the Wagah border.

#### Day 4: Amritsar

Today we explore the beautiful Golden Temple (Shri Harimandir Sahib), which sits in the middle of a sacred lake surrounded by a marble walkway, and spend time listening to the soothing sounds of the devout chanting of verses from the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. We will endeavour to include a meal at the Golden Temple, the temple kitchen feeds 100,000 people a day and visitors are more than welcome. Visit Jallianwala Bagh, the site of the infamous 1919 massacre that played such an important role in India's independence. This evening enjoy the unique experience of a night at the movies, Indian style, as we head out to see the latest Bollywood blockbuster.

#### Days 5/6: Dharamsala

Travel from Amritsar to Dharamsala (5-6 hrs / 210km) including stops en-route. This is a great opportunity to view life in rural India in all its variety. Depending on the arrival time in Dharamsala we may have time to visit a meditation centre for some relaxation after dinner. Dharamsala is famous as the home of the exiled Dalai Lama - this hilltop retreat is full of monasteries, prayer flags and monks in crimson robes. Spend time exploring the many facets of Tibetan Buddhism, learning about the inherent spiritual beliefs of this peaceful religion, as well as soaking up the great mountain views from McLeod Ganj. Visit the fascinating Norbulingka Institute which was developed to train Tibetan refugees in skills

needed to preserve the traditional arts and crafts of Tibet. Its peaceful grounds feature a beautiful temple with some amazing spiritual iconography, as well as some ornate statues. The surrounding area is dotted with workshops, where wood carving, metalwork and needlework are done. We will have time for the students to observe skilled tradesmen at work. Situated about 6km from Dharamsala, Gyuto Monastery is a popular pilgrim site and the abode of Karmapa (the head of the Karma Kagyu, a major school of Tibetan Buddhism). Often referred to as TCV School, the monastery houses the majestic image of Shakyamuni Buddha, enshrined in a small chamber. The structures of the stupa in the monastery have a stark resemblance to the structures that were built by King Asoka during the 3rd century BC. In the afternoon we take part in a cooking demonstration by a local man who has been conducting these classes for years and learn to make the popular 'momos', a speciality in Tibetan cuisine.

### Day 7: Journey to Haridwar

*Morning activities to be advised.* We'll bid farewell to our hill top base as we drive to Pathankot in the heart of the Punjab (2.5 hours drive) to catch the overnight train to Haridwar, departing at 2035 hrs arriving 0620am on day 8. Travelling by train is a great way to see the full kaleidoscope of life in this great nation. The Indian rail network is the backbone of the country and travelling by rail is a richly rewarding experience, an opportunity to sit back and watch the world go by as the sights of Northern India go past our window.

### Days 8/9: Rishikesh, retreat

We travel 20km north to Rishikesh on the banks of the mighty Ganges River. On arrival we will cross the river via the pedestrian suspension bridge to the left bank. It is a surreal scene, with scampering monkeys, multi-storey temples, and Hindu pilgrims walking along the banks of the Ganges. We'll stop off for tea and cake in a small café and drink in the unique atmosphere before heading to the Brahmapuri Ashram. Over the next two days we get to experience life in an Ashram, including the ancient rituals of meditation and yoga. We can either opt for a one hour session at one of the Ashrams or immerse ourselves for a whole day in the Ashram; waking up, bathing, morning prayers, Asanas, sharing breakfast, resting, chanting and meditating until the evening. There will also be time to take a walk along the river, amidst orchards and herb gardens to the Swarg Ashram, to witness the spectacular sunset Aarti, a daily prayer ceremony on the river bank, where scores of yellow-clad pupils of the ashram pray together. The chanting of mantras and the setting sun make for a truly moving experience. Priests then place leaf boats loaded with flowers and candles into the river. A very memorable two days.

### Day 10: Return to Delhi

We have a choice of a free morning in Rishikesh before heading back to Haridwar and boarding a mid afternoon train to Delhi. On arrival back in the capital we head straight to our centrally located hotel for our last night in India. Alternatively we can catch an early morning train that arrives back in Delhi for lunch time allowing us the afternoon and evening to enjoy the capital at a more leisurely pace.

### Day 11: Delhi to UK

We transfer back to the airport for in time for our flight to the UK.

Important information: It is important to realise that the itinerary needs to be flexible. While every effort will be made to follow the above schedule, in the event of political problems, airline schedule changes or natural events, we will do our best to make your trip as enjoyable and hassle-free as possible, but it is important to EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED and be prepared to accept some slight changes. Relax and have faith in your guides.



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