



INDIA TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

From the moment you arrive in India, your senses are assaulted from every direction. There seems to be people everywhere. There is colour, smells, squalor and beauty all co-existing in a seemingly chaotic order and no matter how many guide books you may read, nothing prepares you for that first moment. If there is any one thing you may notice, it is the inextricable link between everyday life and the spiritual. Whether it is on road signs or advertising billboards, God, in all his or her many forms is well and truly there. In the evenings, after a day's trading, incense is burned in thanksgiving in many shops and markets and altars can be found at every street corner. Catholic churches can sometimes be confused with Hindu temples as the mass goes make offerings to their favorite saints, placing garlands of flowers about their necks.

There is no doubt that India can be a bewildering country, but people are generally very kind and helpful and are genuinely interested in you. Despite this, it is still advisable to take sensible precautions when travelling at night or alone. In general, common sense and cultural sensitivity will see you right.

The other thing you will immediately notice is the heat. It will, most likely, be very hot and very humid. You will be in India for the monsoon season and while heavy rains can cool things down a bit, shorter spells of rain simply turn an otherwise scorching hot day into a scorching hot steam room with a very muddy floor. As a result, the way you dress will be very important. The way you dress is also very important culturally. While travelling or sightseeing, shorts and t-shirts are fine, but it is always advisable to have something to cover your legs and shoulders when appropriate. While working, it is expected that you will wear long trousers or skirts and that your shoulders are covered. Sandals or flip-flops are everyone's preferred footwear. There will be some opportunity to buy traditional saris, blouses, shirts, dhoti, etc in Kolkata or along the way. The peace process aimed at resolving that conflict is ongoing.

Accommodation Accommodation will be basic but clean, generally based in the houses of religious orders. You may have to share a bedroom but most will have a private bathroom consisting of a flush, western style toilet, sink and tap. Indians tend to prefer bucket baths rather than showers so you too will enjoy such pleasures. There is always running water so you will have no problem staying clean and washing clothes. Most bedrooms have fans that work when there is electricity – which sometimes works. There may be a TV in some of the houses – but the same applies as to the fan. Phones sometimes work if they have been installed while mobiles are very much hit and miss. All Indians have mobile phones but there does not seem to be reciprocal arrangements with Irish networks anywhere north of Kolkata. As a result, our phones tend not to work.

Caste System Some Indian people may lead you to believe that the caste system does not really matter any more. While it may have less relevance for some, it still plays a major role in the lives of many. There are four main castes: Brahmin (priests and teachers), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (merchants) and Shudra (labourers). Beneath the four main castes are the Dalits, formerly referred to as Untouchables

and these people hold menial jobs, such as toilet cleaners, sweepers and some rickshaw drivers (generally the hand pulled type). These social divisions, while Hindu in origin, permeate greater Indian society and are evident amongst Christians and Muslims groups. Title (Dr., Mr., etc.) and rank or position is very important and people will openly talk of their subordinates.

Drugs You should not become involved with drugs of any kind. Penalties for possession of narcotic substances can be severe. There is a minimum sentence of six months for possession of small amounts for personal consumption only. However, a 10-year sentence for possession of other amounts applies. The slow judicial process means that lengthy pre-trial detention, usually of several years, is the norm.

Entertainment If you arrive at a new location you may be treated to an array of musical, acting and dancing talent. This is known as a programme – in fact, everything in India is a programme. It is expected that you would say a few words both before and again sometimes after the show. As a general rule, always be expected to say a few words. If you could share any of your own talents, the locals would be honoured.

Environmental Issues The overwhelming population impacts hugely on the environment and, unfortunately, very little connection has been made in people's minds between environmental pollution and poor health. Rubbish is thrown everywhere and municipal waste just piles up along the open sewers, which run through most towns and cities. Cattle and pigs act as waste disposal units, munching through the detritus of a billion people.

Fitness While you will not be expected to carry out any heavy work or excessive physical activity, it is recommended that you try to get reasonably fit, as the environment can be difficult at times.

Food and Drink As long as you enjoy rice and dhal, you will be fine. There will also be lots of fruit and vegetables, even potatoes, chicken, fish, pickles, flat breads and cakes. Beer is readily available along with whiskey, which is very popular. After Scotland, India is the second largest producer of whiskey worldwide. You may occasionally get some wine. Indian beer and spirits are very cheap and good but imported varieties are much more expensive. In restaurants, eat what the locals are eating and make sure it is piping hot. Avoid buffets in western-style hotels as this food has probably been sitting around for quite some time. Do not buy or accept peeled fruit – peel it yourself. When handling food ensure your hands are clean. Unfortunately, you have no control over the cleanliness of other people's hands so if in doubt about the safety of food preparation, do not take risks.

Gifts We recommend that you bring a small gift with you – typically a bottle of Irish whiskey – and make a donation to your hosts when leaving. €100 goes a long way. In addition, it is always appreciated if you offer to buy a meal while travelling, offer to pay for petrol for the jeep or buy some treats for the house – nuts, crisps, beers etc. Anything larger than this is neither necessary nor desirable.

Hydration Drink plenty of water and tea – avoid too much alcohol, as this is a diuretic. Keep an eye on the color and amount of urine you produce – it should be colorless and plentiful. You will probably lose a lot of salt through perspiration but this is easily replaced by adding salt to your food and by eating crisps, peanuts, poppadoms and various other crispy snacks that are eaten at every meal. It is not recommended to take Dioralyte or any similar oral electrolytes replacement products unless for prescribed use.

Luggage Aim to travel light. Clothes should be loose fitting, easy to maintain and light to carry. It might be advisable to borrow or invest in a good travel rucksack/kitbag and comfortable sandals. Travel items like travel towels, environmentally friendly shower gel/shampoo/washing detergent are always handy.

Money One Euro is worth approximately 65 Rupees (Rs). Rupees are divided into 100 paise (p). There are 5, 10, 20, 25 and 50p coins and 1, 2 and 5 Rs coins. Notes occur as 10, 20, 50, 100, 500 and 1000 Rs. ATMs are fairly common

and Credit Cards are accepted in larger hotels and shops. Many ATM machines accept Credit Cards for cash advances. Money can be exchanged in the airport, hotels and banks. Euros can be exchanged with no difficulty.

Poverty India's poor have been left behind by the economic growth that has seen western countries queuing up to invest in the countries newfound wealth. While there is vast personal wealth visible on the streets of Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai, the level of poverty is sometimes overwhelming. We can read and try to conceptualize the idea of 400 million people (out of a total population of a billion) trying to survive on about 70 cent per day but this only becomes real when confronted by children and adult beggars, often brutally deformed, begging for scraps at every corner, tapping at the taxi window at every traffic light and hopelessly crying out for help. The most difficult aspect of this harsh reality is that we cannot help everyone. There are more hopeless cases than we could ever help and giving a handful of rupees to a few starving children solves little but our own conscience.

Population India has the second largest population in the world, following swiftly in the shadow of China. By the time you leave India, you will have no doubt in your mind as to what a large population looks like. Even in the remotest places, there seems to be people everywhere. Your first experience of this will happen on day one as you are greeted in Kolkata by almost 15,000,000 people.

Prices While there has been huge price inflation in the last few years, leaving many Indians in an even more precarious position, to us, prices in India still appear to be very reasonable for local goods, food and clothing. However, imported items can be surprisingly expensive. An extremely good meal and a couple of beers in a reasonable hotel or restaurant will generally cost about €5. Clothes and jewelry in the markets are very cheap but quality can be suspect. It is possible to find more expensive high quality artwork and crafts also. Shop around and don't be won over by tall tales. If you do decide to buy clothes or souvenirs, try to get some local knowledge as to what a particular item might be worth, then haggle all you like. Accept that you will inevitably pay more than you should and certainly more than a local would, but while the difference may seem large in Rupees, when converted to Euros, it is generally not worth worrying over.

Sunstroke While you will be in India during the monsoon season, it can sometimes be very sunny. Be aware that you are losing fluids, overheating and prone to sunstroke and heat shock. This will be particularly the case during the first few days. Take it easy at first and drink plenty of water.

Swine Flu On arrival in India travellers from affected countries (including Ireland) should be prepared to be questioned and/or checked for symptoms of Influenza A (H1N1). Travellers suspected of having H1N1 will be admitted to designated hospitals for compulsory quarantine, testing and treatment.

Taxis Pre-paid taxis are readily available at airports and bus and train stations but taxis can also be stopped on the street along with rickshaws. In such cases, it is best to fix a price and do not be persuaded by the 'if you like my driving you can pay' line. This is particularly important to remember if travelling in the larger cities. It is advisable to get the driver to turn on the meter if one exists and works.

Terrorist Activities Particularly after the Mumbai attacks, we must be particularly cautious when travelling in India. According to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, there is a high threat of terrorism throughout India and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs recommends extreme caution. Additionally, there are occasionally general strikes (Bunds) that descend into violent clashes. Some areas in the Northeast and elsewhere are simply too risky to visit because of 'underground' activity. However, you will be visiting areas that are generally considered safe but vigilance is always required. Locals who have a good idea of where to go and where to avoid will always accompany you. At all times, take local advice.

Time +4.5 hours.

Travel This may be the most memorable part of your journey. Roads are poor, drivers are crazy and rules of the road do not apply. A journey regularly begins with a prayer – you will see why!

Water Only drink bottled water in restaurants and from street vendors and ensure that the seal has not been tampered with. While working on the project, you will be provided with treated water for drinking and brushing teeth. Don't take ice in drinks unless you know it is from purified water, ensure salads are washed in treated water and don't sing in the shower.

Wildlife If you are very lucky, you may see some wild elephants in jungle areas but more commonly you will see them as working animals. The most common wild animals will be a whole variety of insects, flying and otherwise. Unfortunately, most of these are quite large when compared to Irish varieties, so be prepared. Cockroaches are everywhere, but after a while you will get used to their scuttle across the floor. While cattle and pigs are not quite wildlife, they do roam freely along with dogs, mice and rats. But do beware of monkeys – they scavenge everywhere, are vicious and can attack. Rabies is a problem so just steer clear.

Women Women in India are entitled to vote, own property and participate in government, but India is most definitely a male dominated society. This is something you will encounter. While many women are well educated and extremely articulate, they show great and often undue deference to male counterparts. Men on the other hand hold court whether or not they deserve to and will sometimes go so far as to tolerate the opinion of a woman!