

India – Social Justice & Cultural Wonders (10 days)

India



Please note: This itinerary can be modified in any way to best suit your school's aims, learning objectives and budget.

There is no other country on earth engages the senses quite like India. It is a destination that both challenges and fascinates, offering an extraordinary blend of ethnic groups, traditions, and religions unmatched anywhere. Yet amidst this diversity, some constants remain: cricket, curry, and a deep love for Bollywood.

The legacy of British colonial rule is still visible across the country in its historic modes of transport, grand architecture, and legal and political systems. While poverty can be confronting, the unrelenting energy and humanity of India are awe-inspiring. From its breathtaking landscapes and well-maintained tiger sanctuaries to its globally influential figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, the champion of non-violent resistance, and Mother Teresa, the devoted missionary, India's impact is profound.

This 10-day tour takes us through the eastern regions of Kolkata, Darjeeling, and Varanasi, revealing ancient ruins, vibrant ceremonies, and fascinating rituals. We'll gain insight into the vital work of charities and aid organisations, witnessing their life-changing impact firsthand.

Highlights include taking in the majestic views of Mt Everest from the foothills of Darjeeling, an in-depth exploration of Mother Teresa's missions and other charitable initiatives in Kolkata, and an immersive study of the spiritual and ceremonial practices of Varanasi.

Day 1

Arrive Kolkata



Upon our arrival in Kolkata, we are welcomed by our tour leader and transferred by bus to our hotel. During the journey, our leader provides an introduction to Indian culture and shares essential tips to ensure our travels are both safe and enjoyable.

Kolkata, formerly known as Calcutta, is the seventh-largest city in India, home to 14 million residents—so prepare for an exciting experience! Once the political capital of the British Empire in the East, Kolkata is now the commercial hub of eastern India and is often hailed as the country's intellectual, artistic, and cultural capital.

We begin our journey with a visit to a renowned pottery village, where artisans craft religious statues and figurines for the numerous spiritual festivals held across India throughout the year. The village is a riot of colour, with sculptures formed from clay and bamboo, then painted and adorned with intricate decorations. As we explore the surrounding streets, we encounter bustling hawkers, family-run cottage industries, and a unique sense of order within the apparent chaos. *(meals: dinner)*

Day 2

Kolkata



Kolkata is renowned for its diverse modes of transportation. It boasts India's only remaining urban tram network and is the last city where hand-pulled rickshaws are still in use. Vibrant yellow Ambassador taxis line the streets, alongside three-wheeled carts, bicycles, and the occasional wandering cow. Drivers honk incessantly, traffic crawls, and the roads are a lively chaos.

This morning, we embark on a walking tour through Kolkata's backstreets and laneways, uncovering the city's authentic charm. We discover why the Chinese community continues to thrive in Tiretta Bazaar and learn how the Armenians gifted the city its oldest surviving Christian church.

Crossing the iconic Howrah Bridge, we arrive at the bustling and colourful flower market, where traders haggle and navigate the energetic crowds.

The legacy of British colonial rule and its connection to British royalty remains a topic of debate in India. We delve into this history with a visit to the Victoria Memorial, a magnificent white marble structure built to honour Queen Victoria's death in 1901. (Interestingly, Queen Victoria never visited India.) Our guide highlights key exhibits in the museum, offering insights into this era.

We also make a brief stop at the gates of Eden Gardens, India's second-largest cricket ground, established in 1864 and a hallowed site for cricket enthusiasts. This evening, we enjoy the warmth of Indian hospitality, joining a local family for a traditional Bengali meal—a perfect end to the day. *(meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)*

Day 3

Kolkata



A ride on Kolkata's historic tram system is an essential experience for any visitor. This journey through the city's suburban areas offers a unique perspective on daily life while showcasing a fascinating mix of Islamic, Victorian, and Bengali architecture.

By mid-morning, we visit the Dakshineswar Temple, one of Bengal's most revered shrines. Dedicated to Goddess Kali, the temple attracts pilgrims daily, all seeking a moment of divine connection.

Gender equality and the role of women in Indian society are pressing issues. To gain a deeper understanding, we visit Sasha, a social enterprise led by local businesswomen. Sasha supports over 5,000

artisans in producing high-quality handcrafts, textiles, and decorations. During our visit, we learn about their initiatives in social and economic empowerment and their commitment to ethical business and Fair Trade practices.

No trip to India is complete without exploring the cultural phenomenon of Bollywood. As the world's largest film industry, Bollywood produces nearly twice as many films as Hollywood each year. In the late afternoon, we head to a Bollywood dance studio, where we learn some basic moves and hear about the industry's immense influence on India's youth—a lively and unforgettable experience. (meals: breakfast, lunch)

Day 4

Kolkata - Siliguri (Darjeeling)



Despite Kolkata's growing prosperity in recent decades, a significant portion of its population still lives in poverty—a reality we explore during our visit to the Missionaries of Charity House convent. Here, we learn about the dedicated work of the Sisters and their most famous member, Saint Mother Teresa. Born in Macedonia, Mother Teresa devoted her life to serving Kolkata's sick and poor. Her Order established hospices for the blind, elderly, and disabled, as well as a leper colony. In recognition of her humanitarian efforts, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize before her passing in 1997. On-site, a small museum highlights her life's work, and her tomb serves as a daily pilgrimage site for those who come to pay their

respects.

We bid farewell to Kolkata and transfer to the airport for a short flight to Siliguri, located in India's far northeast. Siliguri serves as a gateway to Darjeeling, Bhutan, and Nepal. Upon arrival, we board a private bus for the scenic journey to Darjeeling, a legendary hill station bordering the Himalayas. Established by the British, Darjeeling sits at an altitude of 2,050 metres and is surrounded by lush tea plantations. This afternoon, we take in one of India's most breathtaking panoramas, with views of Mount Everest and Mount Kanchenjunga in Nepal. The town's culture is a vibrant blend of ethnic groups, including Sherpa, Khampa, Kirati, Bhutai, and Bengali communities. We also reflect on Indian identity and what it means to live in a country where diverse ethnicities, religions, and languages coexist.

There's ample time to explore this charming colonial-era town, visit Buddhist monasteries, and immerse ourselves in its unique atmosphere before enjoying dinner at a Tibetan-inspired restaurant.

(meals: breakfast, dinner)

Day 5

Darjeeling



We rise early to the cool, refreshing climate of Darjeeling and set out after breakfast for a scenic walk up Tiger Hill. Here, we witness a breathtaking sunrise over the snow-capped Himalayan peaks. On our way, we stop at the ancient Ghoom Monastery, a Tibetan Buddhist site belonging to the Yellow Hat sect. A key attraction is the 15-foot statue of Lord Buddha, known as the Maitreya Buddha, or the Buddha of the Future.

Next, we embark on a short journey aboard the 140-year-old Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. This historic train, powered by both steam and electric engines, winds its way through the region's picturesque hills, sharing its route with charming, century-old stations and infrastructure.

To this day, the railway serves as a vital link for Darjeeling's remote communities.

In the afternoon, we visit the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park, a leader in wildlife conservation and internationally recognised for its efforts. Here, local experts introduce us to the zoo's successful breeding programs for endangered species such as red pandas, snow leopards, and Tibetan wolves. We learn about the zoo's pioneering research in animal behaviour and conservation techniques, which contribute to global preservation efforts.

Later, we explore the bustling bazaars of Darjeeling, filled with a diverse range of Himalayan products. These vibrant markets draw traders and visitors from Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet, offering a fascinating cultural experience. (meals: breakfast, dinner)

Day 6

Darjeeling



Today, we visit a Tibetan vocational training centre, where we learn about the challenges faced by Tibetan refugees. Their homeland, now part of mainland China, lies just a short distance away. Until 1949, Tibet was an independent Buddhist nation in the Himalayas, governed by the Dalai Lama and largely isolated from the rest of the world. However, the Chinese policy of resettlement has made Tibetans a minority in their own land. Second-generation refugees at the centre share their personal stories and guide us through their carpet-making workshop, which has provided livelihoods for their families for over 40 years.

In the mid-afternoon, we embark on an exhilarating mountain bike ride through the scenic hills of Darjeeling. Our route takes us through terraced villages, lush woodlands, and winding streets. Along the way, we visit a tea manufacturing plant, where we gain insight into the rich culture and tradition of tea production. After a guided tour of the factory and plantation, we enjoy a tea-tasting session, sampling some of the region's finest brews.

Back in town, we visit the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, an inspiring tribute to the region's mountaineering legacy. The institute showcases rare artefacts from historic expeditions, including those of Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary, who famously conquered Mt Everest in 1953. It also serves as a training ground for adventurers from around the world and addresses key scientific topics such as global warming and advancements in mountaineering technology and equipment.

Note: While the mountain bike ride is through hilly terrain, no prior experience is required. For those interested, there's also an option to ride in the mountain bike park, weather permitting. (meals: breakfast, lunch)

Day 7

Darjeeling – Siliguri (Overnight train - Varanasi)



We leave the serene mountains of Darjeeling and make our way back to Siliguri.

In the afternoon, there's a brief opportunity to explore the bustling local market before heading to the train station for our overnight journey to Varanasi. Travelling by train in India is a unique and eye-opening experience. With one of the world's largest and busiest rail networks, Indian Railways operates over 7,000 stations and serves as the country's largest employer.

Note: Train compartments are 6-berth soft sleepers, featuring fold-out beds, pillows, sheets, blankets, and air conditioning. The train departs Siliguri in the mid-afternoon and arrives in Varanasi the following morning around 7 am. For those seeking a faster option, a flight is also available. (meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)

Day 8

Arrive Varanasi



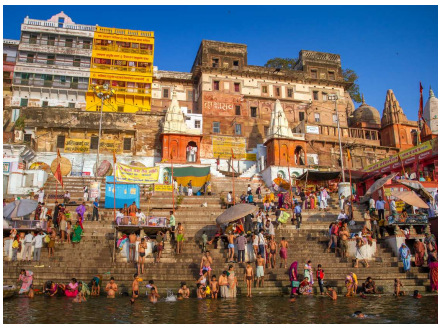
This morning, we arrive in the sacred city of Varanasi, disembarking from our overnight train. Known as the holiest city in India, Varanasi is the ultimate destination for Hindu pilgrims from across the country. The city overflows with shrines, temples, and devotees, offering an extraordinary and visually striking experience. It is a place of profound life and death rituals, with a vibrant atmosphere of sounds, sights, and street hawkers that captivate and overwhelm in equal measure.

Before checking into our hotel, we visit Sarnath, the site of the first Buddhist training centre, established over 2,500 years ago. It was here that Buddha delivered his first teachings to his disciples. As we walk

among the ancient ruins, our guide provides fascinating insights into Buddha's early life and teachings. We also explore the Sarnath Museum, which houses an impressive collection of art and artefacts. Situated on the banks of the sacred Ganges River, Varanasi is considered the spiritual heart of India, drawing millions of pilgrims each year. After checking into our hotel and enjoying lunch, we embark on the 'Courtyards & Courtesans' heritage walking tour. This takes us through the narrow alleys along the river, where we see monkeys swinging from power lines, cows wandering freely, and beautifully carved doorways on weathered buildings. Along the way, we might sample snacks from tiny street vendors or sip sweet tea. The tour concludes at a music training school, where we enjoy captivating performances of traditional music and dance.

In the evening, we delve into the flavours of Indian cuisine. Varanasi is famous for its cooking schools and family-run culinary enterprises, offering dishes like Masala Dosa, Idli, Puri Sabji, Jalebis, and Tamatar Chaat. A local host welcomes us into their home, where we experience daily life and routines before learning to prepare a delicious Varanasi-style meal. (meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner)

Day 9 Varanasi



This morning's early start begins at sunrise, where we board a private boat to see pilgrims standing waist-deep in the river doing their morning prayers. We witness the rituals of life and death as people pray and bathe and see Ghats, the steps that lead to the river where the locals perform these ceremonies.

We head to a wrestling village to learn about India's caste system. It is a form of social stratification with pre-modern origins that serves as India's social structure today.

Later we explore Fort Ramnagar, a red sandstone-fortified structure built in the 18th century using Mughal style architecture. Inside the fort is a museum with collectables that include personal belongings of the royal family, cars, costumes, and elephant saddles made out of silver. We also see the old armoury containing weaponry from Myanmar, Japan and African countries.

Despite immense pressures on its schooling system, India is a world leader in many teaching disciplines. Its teachers are at the forefront of a radical transformation in academic proficiency as the country develops. This afternoon, we visit a local school learning about the Indian educational system, the lives of our contemporaries and their aspirations.

We witness a ceremonial performance at one of the 'Ghats' for our final evening in India. Rituals include ringing brass bells, chanting, aromas of flowers, and smoke for blessings. Indians who come here connect with the river and feel the energy of this ancient city, making it an important place of pilgrimage for people from across the country. (meals: breakfast, dinner)

Day 10 Depart Varanasi



On our final leisurely morning, we visit a local bakery to learn about the traditional process of making Indian naan bread. We hear inspiring stories of how this enterprise has transformed the lives of street children by providing them with vocational training and a safe, promising future. Before departing, we have time to explore the Old City, known as Vishwanath Khand, where we can immerse ourselves in the rich culture and heritage of Varanasi.

Our tour leader ensures all onward travel arrangements are in place before bidding us a fond farewell as we head to the airport. (meals: breakfast)

Summary

Grading

Moderate; To get the most out of this trip, you need to be in good health. However, anyone with a good level of fitness will be able to take part. Some outdoor activities include physical exertion, and there may be long periods of exposure to the elements. You will be expected to walk every day and carry your luggage for short distances. The itinerary may include bike riding, climbing steps and trekking. If your itinerary includes community service work of any description, you will be expected to work diligently during this component. Conditions here may be basic with simple accommodation and bathroom facilities. Suitable packing lists will be provided to match the content of the itinerary.

Accommodation

School tours: Student accommodation is on a twin/triple share basis. Teacher accommodation is on a single room basis. Hotels usually hold a 3-star equivalent rating. Separate sleeping areas and bathrooms are provided for boys, girls, and staff members at homestays.

Transport

Depending on the tour, modes of transport may include modern air-conditioned private coach, boat, train, plane.

Your Tour Leader

A tour leader accompanies all group tours. Your tour leader is the person who most influences the success of your trip. They have been meticulously trained and are very experienced in running tours. Every tour leader is locally employed, therefore they are the best person to showcase their country and culture. Their expertise and knowledge creates an insightful and authentic experience of the region. They are with you throughout your trip from breakfast time until the group returns to the hotel in the evening. They are contactable 24/7.

For more information on the role of the tour leader, local guides and accompanying teachers, please refer to our website.

Group Size

School tours: Minimum group size is 16 students with a minimum of 2 staff members.

There are no maximum participant numbers on any tour.

Service-Learning Programs

The local community instigates all our service-learning programs in response to their genuine needs and goals. Every program is conducted only after careful consultation with local community leaders and authorities.

We assess each program during the consultation process to ensure that it's sustainable, ethical, and empowers local people. Each project is designed to have lasting economic benefits that build wealth within the community – we're not in the business of tokenistic hand-outs.

- **Community engagement programs.** Through our strong relationships with local schools and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), students can help deliver social service and education initiatives within a community. Your students will work in government-run classrooms or vocational training programs to help teach English (by following a lesson plan prepared in advance), help implement health programs, or work alongside local students as they learn small business skills.

For more details about our service-learning programs, please refer to our website.

Land Trip Cost and Details

Cost per traveller from A\$ 1,750

Based on a minimum of:
16 students & 2 accompanying teachers/staff members.
**Smaller or larger group sizes priced on application*

Inclusions

- All accommodation, transport, activities, entrance costs and other programs as described in the itinerary
- Professional *Adventure Travel* tour leader throughout the trip & additional specialist guides
- Extensive destination-specific risk management and assessment
- Meals (and drinking water) as listed in the itinerary
- 24-hour **IN COUNTRY** support
- Pre-departure support, briefings and planning meetings
- Tips for tour leaders, local guides & drivers

Exclusions

- International flights to/from India
- Travel Visa costs (if required)
- Cost of Community projects/Service-learning programs \$2000
- Spending money
- Travel insurance

Contact details

Adventure Travel
Tel: (+61 3) 9876 5058
info@adventuretravel.com.au
www.adventuretravel.com.au

