

Why India?

After working and sweating for three months in a village in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, I decided to head north for a break. I checked in to a remote guesthouse in the rugged Aravalli Mountains of eastern Rajasthan, where I gorged on fiery curries, fresh vegetables, and chewy parathas, all served on dinnerware made from banana leaves stitched together with thorns. At night, I spread out on the rooftop to sleep. There was no crushing density of bodies, no old men crapping in the street, no tinny loudspeakers screeching Indian show tunes. Instead I stared at the stars while kingfishers settled into the mango trees. Paradise. Except it was 110 degrees at 2 A.M., and I had worms.

Travel in India isn't always easy. Nowhere else is the choreography of humanity and nature more passionate, bewildering, sensorial, and in-your-face extreme. "In India, the easiest and most necessary thing to ignore was the obvious," wrote Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul on surviving the difficulties of traveling in such an overloaded place. But it is precisely this blaring cacophony—the technicolor saris drying against clay hills, the sticky aroma of hot fried curry, the insistence of haggling shop owners—that draws travelers, leaving an indelible, soul-rankling impression. And the appeal is on the rise: India's Ministry of Tourism reports that 3.3 million foreigners visited the country in 2004—an increase of 24 percent over the previous year.

On the surface, the lure is obvious. The country is a stuffed geography, from the glacial flanks of 28,169-foot Kanchenjunga—highest in the nation, third-tallest in the world—to the



overgrown, jungly backwaters snaking through Kerala. This 1.2-million-square-mile landscape is home to 89 national parks and nearly 90,000 species of animals—including sloth bears, flying lizards, leopards, rhinos, and every variety of monkey.

The country's true richness, however, comes from its rapidly changing populace—now bloated to more than one billion. In the chaos of a sultry gray morning in Chennai, I heard at least a dozen languages in the train station, passed a handful of religious rituals on my way to market, and paid a mahout five rupees for his elephant to bless me with a trunk tap on the head. Later that day in the market, I met a man, Edwin Pudatha, who



RIGHT LIGHTS, BIG COUNTRY:
A rush to the future in Chennai

WALTER BIBIKOW/GETTY; MAP BY AUDE VAN RYN. PREVIOUS SPREAD: GENTL & HYERS (2).

held the Guinness world record for "sitting and standing," which he earned by going from sitting to standing 4,150 times in one hour. India, it turns out, has the lowest rate of Olympic-medal winners per capita but the highest percentage of Guinness world-record holders. "People aren't that famous in the Olympics," Pudatha explained, noting that his stunt was a regional media event and cause for monthlong parties in his village. "Now, I am known."

India was once a place for smacking head-on into an unchanged heritage; now it's a curious mix of caste-free middle-class technophiles, high-fashion elite, and entrepreneurs swooning in free-market bliss. You can easily find yourself sharing a plane ride with a software engineer from Hyderabad (known as Cyberabad) or a professor who just rapped with Bill Clinton about watershed management at the Aspen Institute. Across the globe, the permeation of Bollywood, masala dosas, and curly-toed Rajasthani slippers into Western society has helped fuel international interest in the subcontinent.

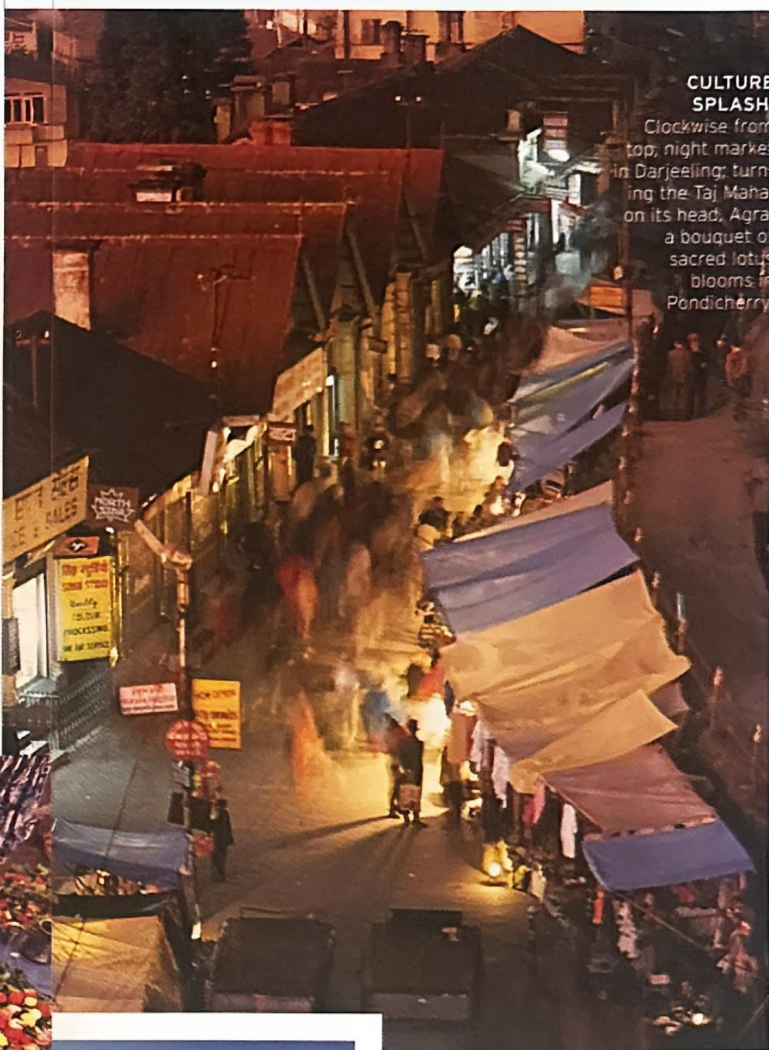
And travel to India has never been easier. In the past few years, the country has erupted with sparkling five-star hotels, all-inclusive spa resorts, and air-conditioned tour buses. The recent deregulation of the Indian airline industry has given rise to carriers with names like Air Sahara, SpiceJet, and—my favorite—Kingfisher Airlines, which offers deeply discounted



cross-country shuttles that allow travelers to curtail the grueling long-haul train trips. The Indian government has also relaxed restrictions on international investment, inspiring developers like Alfred Ford—of Henry Ford lineage—to break ground on a \$500 million Vail-style ski resort in Himachal Pradesh and encouraging cruise lines to add Mumbai, Kerala, and Goa itineraries.

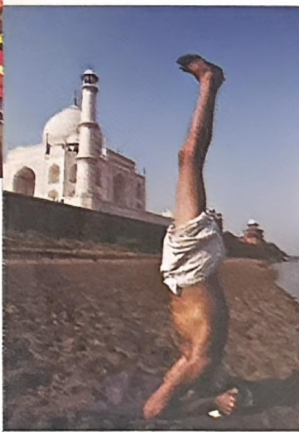
"These days, travelers to India are on a quest for experience," explains Pamela Lassers, of tour operator Abercrombie & Kent, which has seen a 55 percent jump in India bookings. This is largely due, she says, to the sudden ease in negotiating the country's famously rugged byways and improvements in domestic air service, as well as the growing availability of guides—A&K has just opened its second India-based office, in Jaipur; Mountain Travel Sobek leads trips from Rajasthan to the high mountain passes of Sikkim; and veteran operator Cox & Kings still offers more guided excursions than any other company.

Of course, a "guided tour" here is anything but predictable. On a visit to the cool, lush hill station of Kodaikanal, I hired a guide for what was to have been a simple stroll through the woods. A bearded naturalist with a walking stick, hiking boots, and a checked flannel shirt, Arjun became something of an



CULTURE SPLASH

Clockwise from top, night market in Darjeeling; turning the Taj Mahal on its head, Agra; a bouquet of sacred lotus blooms in Pondicherry.



Odyssean guide, leading me five miles up a faint trail to the wooden cabin of a Rastafarian Indian artist, across mossy vistas to the hobbitlike mud-and-dung wattle home of a British ex-schoolteacher, and finally through a grove of banyan trees knitted into a tunnel of living wood. Here we happened upon a grizzled sadhu (ascetic), who slipped Arjun a fat joint as a thank-you for mailing a package for him. "A *High Times* reporter was my last American

client," Arjun explained sheepishly, wagging his head.

India absorbs all these influences without compromising its mystique. Varanasi pilgrimages and marriages are arranged online, but temples in Kalimpong are lit exclusively by candles. A mega-interstate now stripes the desert plains of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, but drivers go the wrong direction when they feel like it. The country still has tigers, camels, the Himalayas, the paratha wallah on the corner, fresh coconuts and mangoes falling off the trees, sadhus on hiking trails—and the mystery of how all of it functions with such erratic, spectacular success. "Well," as Mahatma Gandhi said, "India is a country of nonsense." And that is exactly why you go. [OT]

10

The Joy of Chaos

The top ten adventures on the subcontinent

1 / BEST ASHRAM /

Sri Aurobindo/Auroville, Pondicherry

Throw a mango anywhere in India—the birthplace of yoga—and you'll hit an ashram. Officially designated as a place for spiritual striving, these retreat centers range from spare mountain meditation chambers to urban yoga Disneylands. There's no better representation of ashram life, however, than Auroville, a humming township near the former French colony of Pondicherry, in tropical Tamil Nadu. Spread out along the warm Bay of Bengal, the eight-square-mile town is being built by followers of the famous guru Sri Aurobindo and his French partner, a woman known as "the Mother." The Aurovillians have constructed an internationally populated utopia of organic farms, holistic hospitals, arts-and-crafts centers, and hatha yoga instruction.

Ease into your tour of all things Auroville with sunrise "integral" yoga—more meditative than stretching—at the original Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry.

Catch a hearty ayurvedic meal of rice idlis, coconut chutney, and banana-flower sambar at the Solar Kitchen (run partly by solar energy) and get the best yoga instruction in the state at the Quiet Healing Centre. Finally, try a session on the "sound bed": an oversize, Indian-style guitar that you lie inside while it's played—like an iPod for your soul. DETAILS: Accommodations, \$35–\$50; www.sriarobindoashram.org —L.M.

2 / BEST PILGRIMAGE /

Varanasi

At Manikarnika Ghat, I became so mesmerized watching the fires devouring the human bodies that I was startled when a vagabond approached: "Sir, 150 dead are cremated here every day, and they become enlightened." Barefoot workers were preparing the pyres, sprinkling incense on the dead, setting them alight. "Sir, you like charas?" he asked, meaning hashish.

Apparently Lord Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction, is an avid marijuana user, so hashish is widely tolerated in India. But I was in town for more temporal allures: to witness some of the millions of pilgrims who pour annually into this 3,000-year-old city. Hindus come to cleanse themselves of sin in the sacred Ganges River. Better still is the prospect of dying in the river, for the City of Light is doubly holy as the only place on the planet where all five elements converge: water, wind, sky, earth, and the "eternal fire" that has been kept lit for 2,000 years. According to Hindu beliefs, passing away in these waters leads to liberation from the cycle of reincarnation.

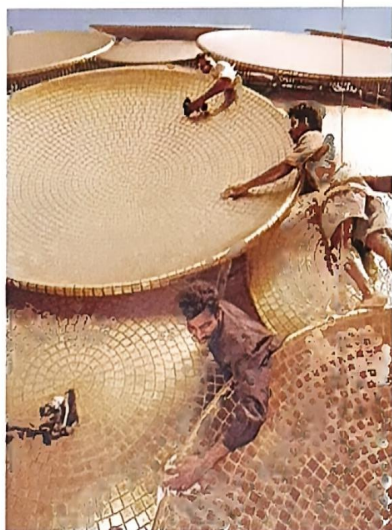
After dinner on the rooftop restaurant at Palace on the Ganges, a hotel outside the old town, I returned to the fray mid-evening. The pilgrims—women in peacock-colored saris, sadhus in steel chastity belts, the old and the sick yearning for death—cut a timeless scene

among the riverfront assembly. Mantras blared from temple loudspeakers, and the streets were choked by homeless pilgrims, aggressive touts, morose cows, and cycle rickshaws. Elsewhere I would have felt overwhelmed by the clamor. But here I was unwittingly infused with the city's energy of exultation—part of the reason, no doubt, that a trip to India feels incomplete without a visit to Varanasi. DETAILS: Doubles at Palace on the Ganges from \$70; 011-91-542-2315050 —VICTOR PAUL BORG

3 / BEST BIKE TOUR /

Leh to Manali, Ladakh

I mountain-bike for the downhill, which is why I was thrilled when I heard about riding in the Himalayas: 20-plus-mile descents. So I headed for India's northwestern state of Ladakh, home to some of the most remote bike



touring—and biggest downhills—in the world.

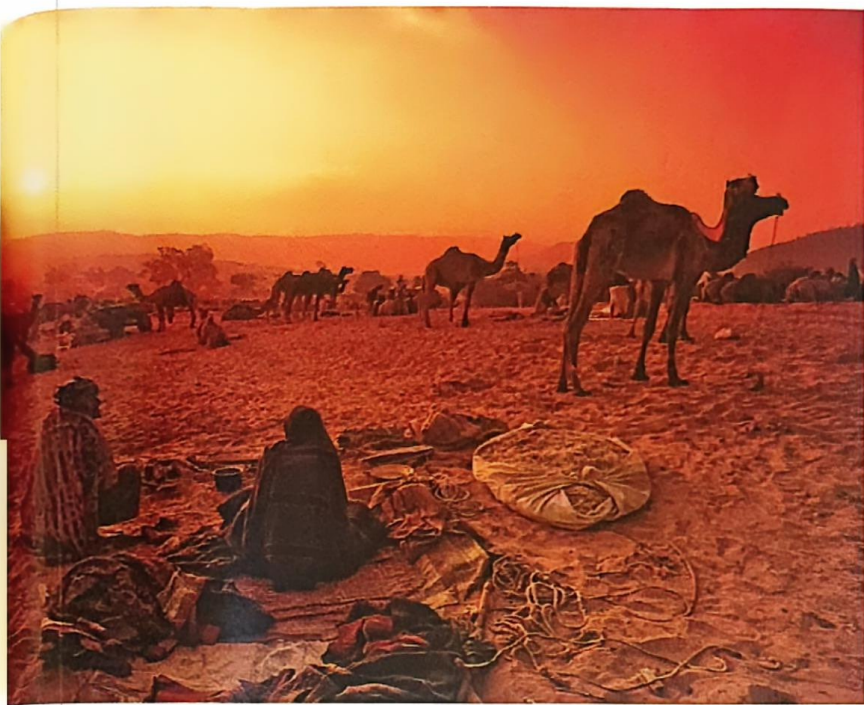
At 11,500 feet, the town of Leh—where I met up with a dozen other cyclists on a tour with Aspen-based outfitter KE Adventure Travel—sits over 1,300 feet above the highest incorporated town in the United States (Leadville, Colorado). In three weeks, we

alpinism memorabilia). Hoping to follow in Norgay's footsteps, I book a multiday trek and set off into the nearby hills.

Even for those without high-altitude designs, Darjeeling is a worthwhile stopover. The town has a flavor as distinct as the tea grown on its outskirts, seasoned not just by Raj-era architecture, bakeries, and antique shops but also by a heady dose of Himalayan cultures—Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim are all next door. In town, the Hotel Windamere, a 19th-century Heritage Hotel overlooking Chowrasta Square, provides local color and great views. **DETAILS:** Doubles from \$145, with full board; 011-91-354-2254041, www.windamerehotel.com. —D.O.

India's splashiest big-water adventure.

Reaching the put-in remains a challenge unto itself, requiring a 50-mile upstream motorboat transfer from Dibrugarh, followed by a two-day jeep ride into the jungle of Arunachal Pradesh from neighboring Assam. Up next are seven days of wilderness paddling, with the verdant scenery punctuated by huge Class III–IV+ rapids on a scale more reminiscent of *The Perfect Storm* than *The River Wild*. **DETAILS:** For now, Aquaterra offers the only set departures on the Brahmaputra; November 24–December 8; kayaking from \$3,100, rafting from \$3,600; 011-91-11-29212641, www.treknraft.com. —D.O.



9 / BEST RIVER /

Brahmaputra, Arunachal Pradesh

In 2002, Vaibhav Kala, owner of Aquaterra Adventures, hatched an audacious plan to offer the first-ever commercial expedition down the 110-mile upper stretch of the Brahmaputra, which flows from Tibet through Arunachal Pradesh, in far northeastern India. Locally known as the Siang, the Class IV+ Brahmaputra rivals the Grand Canyon when it comes to whitewater, with the added attraction of exotic tribes that rarely see outsiders. Today, with other companies looking to follow Aquaterra's lead, the Brahmaputra float is on the verge of becoming

10 / BEST FESTIVAL /

Pushkar Camel Fair, Rajasthan

You haven't lived until you've communed with camels, which is why you can't miss the Pushkar Camel Fair, a mind-blowingly biblical convergence of camels, camel traders, mystics, and musicians, all camped out in Rajasthan's Thar Desert. For centuries, during the month of Kartik (the eighth lunar month of the Hindu calendar, falling roughly around October and November on the Gregorian calendar), Rajasthan's camel herders have trekked to the town of Pushkar in time for the full moon. This year's fair (November 2–5) will bring about 200,000 people and 50,000 camels to the desert bash.

At the fair you'll find a sea of khaki-brown sand dunes pitched with dung-colored tents and entire families camped out: Hindu men in turbans, Rajasthani tribal women in color-drenched skirts and saris, kids hawking everything from camel bells to camel-cart rides. You'll also find camels—and lots of them: babies with spindly legs and big, goofy heads; teenage camels; worn-out camels; camels standing; camels sleeping; camels adorned with braids, tassels, and tattoos. You can ride camels, watch camel races, or witness the business of camel trading up close. (Want to take home a new pet? A three-year-old camel goes for around 25,000 rupees—or \$567.)

Stay at the Royal Camp, upscale tented lodging pioneered by the Maharaja of Jodhpur in the 1990s, just a few dunes from the festivities. Each safari-style, canvas tent has twin beds with crisp white linens, a front porch with teak chairs, a private bath, and buckets of hot bathwater delivered to your door. **DETAILS:** Doubles from \$250, including meals; 011-91-291-2571991, www.jodhpurheritage.com. —KIMBERLY BROWN SEELY

[BONUS] #11 / BEST ESCAPE FROM INDIA /

Bangaram Island Resort, Lakshadweep Islands

The battering madness of India's cultural mosh pit can exhaust even the most seasoned traveler, which is why many Indians advise leaving the mainland to truly appreciate its charms. There's no better place to get this critical break—without passing through customs—than the isolated, talcum-beached coral atoll of Bangaram, one of 26 tiny coconut-palm islands that make up the Lakshadweep archipelago, in the Arabian Sea.

Of the three islands open to tourists, Bangaram Island Resort—which owns the entirety of the island—boasts the least development, with only 34 teak-and-tile bungalows spread taste-

fully throughout the island's 128 acres. After you've settled into a private hut, stumble a few feet across the snowy beach to fin through crystal waters. The sea life is so accommodating that the resort asks divers to refrain from riding the massive sea turtles and manta rays that lounge around the house reef.

For more adventurous fauna, house dive masters will take you to deeper reaches, including a sheer limestone chasm known as the Grand Canyon. Deeper still, fishermen will find wahoo and sailfish that are the stuff of Hemingway lore. Or pass on it all and spend an afternoon in a silent hammock for that much-needed perspective on India. **DETAILS:** Bungalows, \$290–\$350 all-inclusive; 011-91-484-2668221, www.cghearth.com. —L.M.