

Pilgrimage Tourism in India

India is a vast country, peopled with diverse and ancient civilizations, and its religious geography is highly complex. Over 80% of India's population practices Hinduism, the ancient indigenous religion of India which has a wide variety of forms and expressions. Muslims, concentrated mainly in north India, constitute about 10% of the Indian population. Other significant religious groups in India include Sikhs, Jains, and Christians. Buddhism is almost extinct in the land of its birth, but many exiled Tibetan Buddhists now make their home in India, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama. India's famed spirituality has made it a popular destination for spiritually-inclined travelers. The process of racial and cultural mixture that began in India 5000-10,000 years ago has been continuous into historical times. Although isolated from the rest of Asia by oceans on three sides and impassable mountain ranges to the north, India has experienced a near-constant influx of differing cultural influences, coming by way of the northwest and the southeast. India in the third millennium BC was inhabited in the tropical south by a people called the Dravidians, in the central and northeastern regions by aboriginal hill and forest tribes, and in the northwest by the highly advanced Indus Valley civilization known as the Harappan culture. The Harappan culture possessed a sophisticated religion called Vedism, which worshipped powerful gods such as Indra, the god of rain; Agni, the god of fire; and Surya, the sun god. During the millennia of the Harappan culture the religion of Vedism developed an increasingly complex form with esoteric rituals and magical chants, and these were later codified in the sacred Hindu texts known as the Vedas. The religion identified as Hinduism did not actually appear until the centuries preceding the Christian era. Hinduism is an aggregation of the religious beliefs and practices deriving from the Vedism. Adding to and further enriching this mix were the concurrently developing religions of Jainism and Buddhism. Indian culture has thus developed a fascinating collection of religious beliefs and customs.

The practice of pilgrimage in India is so deeply embedded in the cultural psyche and the number of pilgrimage sites is so large that the entire subcontinent may actually be regarded as one grand and continuous sacred space. Following the Vedic period the practice of pilgrimage seems to have become quite common, as is evident from sections of the great epic, the Mahabharata (350 BC), which mentions more than 300 sacred sites spanning the sub-continent. Hindus call the sacred places to which they travel tirthas, and the action of going on a pilgrimage tirtha-yatra. The Sanskrit word tirtha means river ford, steps to a river, or place of pilgrimage. In India all temples are considered sacred places and thus religious visitors to the temples may be described as pilgrims. For the purpose of our discussion, however, for a temple to be considered a true pilgrimage shrine it must have a long-term history of attracting pilgrims from a geographic area beyond its immediate region. Given this condition, the number of pilgrimage sites in India is still extremely large.

The primary intention of a pilgrim's visit to a holy site is to receive the darshan of the deity resident in the temple's inner sanctum or open-air shrine. The word darshan, difficult to translate into English, generally means the pilgrim having a sight and/or experience of the deity.

Some Religious sites of India:

- Dwarka; Krishna temple of Dwarkadhish
- Somnath; Shiva Jyotir linga temple
- Ujjain; Mahakaleswar Jyotir linga Shiva temple
- Sanchi; Buddhist stupa
- Ajanta caves; 29 Buddhist, Hindu, Jain sacred caves
- Ellora; Buddhist, Hindu, Jain caves and Grineshwar Jyotir linga
- Mt. Abu; Jain temples
- Pushkar; Brahma temple,
- Ajmer; Shrine of Mu'in al-din Chishti
- Amritsar; Hari Mandir
- Govindval; Sikh temple
- Anandpur Sahib Sikh temple
- Vaishno Devi; cave of Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati
- Amarnath; Shiva cave
- Leh; Buddhist monasteries
- Kurukshetra; Brahma Sarovara
- Devprayag; Raghunath Vishnu temple
- Rishikesh; Laksman Jhula, Neela Kantha Mahadeva temple
- Haridwar; Hari-ki-Pairi Ghat, numerous temples

- Joshimath; Vasudeva temple
- Badrinath; Badrinath temple and nearby five Badri temples
- Kedarnath; Jyotir Linga Shiva temple
- Yamnotri; source of holy Yamuna river
- Gangotri; Goddess Ganga temple
- Vrindavan; numerous beautiful Krishna temples
- Allahabad; Sangam Bath river site
- Varanasi / Banaras; numerous temples, ghats and pilgrimage circuits
- Saranath; Buddhist holy place
- Kushinagar; Holy site where Buddha passed away
- Gaya; Vishnupada temple
- Bodh Gaya; Site where Buddha attained enlightenment
- Rajagriha / Rajgir; Vulture Peak Buddhist site
- Parsanath; Jain temple
- Baidyanath; Shiva Jyotir linga
- Tarakeswar; Tarakanath temple
- Navadip; Dhameswara Shri Chaitanya temple
- Tarapith; Shakti Pitha temple
- Calcutta; Kalighat temple and Dakshineshwar
- Gauhati; Kamakhya Shakti temple
- Puri; Jaganath temple
- Tirupati; Govindaraja and Padmavathi temples
- Tiruvanamalai; Mt. Arunachala and Tiruvanamalai temple
- Swamimalai temple (near Kumbakonam)

- Rameshvaram; Sri Ramananthaswami temple
- Madurai area; temples of Minakshi
- Kanya Kumari; Kumari Amman goddess temple
- Trivandrum; Sri Padmanabhaswami Vishnu temple
- Sravanabelagola; Gomateswara Jain shrine
- Mysore; shrine of Baba Qalander Shah
- Gokarna; Mahaballeswara Shiva temple and Ganapati Ganesh temple
- Pandharpur; Vitthala Krishna temple
- Bhimshankar; Shiva Jyotir linga
- New Delhi; Islamic shrines of Kwaja Nizamuddin Aulia
- Khajuraho; Jain and Hindu temples
- Udipi; Krishna temple
- Amarkantak; hill top temples and source of Narmada river
- Gangasagarar / Sagar Island; Kapil Muni temple