

## 1

## The Best of India

India will humble, awe, frustrate, amaze, and intimidate—all in the same day. Home to the world's most spectacular medieval architecture and largest slums; sacred rivers and filth-strewn streets; religious rituals and endless traffic jams; aristocratic tigers and casteless untouchables; jewel-encrusted tombs and pavement-bound beggars; ancient traditions and modern-day scams—there is so much to take in. Whether you're here to soak up India's spirituality, chill out on the beaches, rejuvenate at an Ayurvedic spa, or live like a king in the land of princes, this chapter will help you experience the very best India has to offer.

### 1 Experiencing Spiritual India

Visiting temples that pulsate with devotion will evoke a sense of the sacred, but even in India, where religion is such an intricate part of daily life, spiritual experiences come when you least expect them.

- **Hop on a Motorbike and Head for the Drumbeat** (Goa): Once capital of the global beach party, Goa may be past its prime, but when rumors start that an event is in the making at a to-be-announced venue, keep your ear to the ground. Why? Because only in some deserted clearing near a golden Goan beach can you trance out with the nations of the world, then find solace in the serenity of a rural villager's smile as she hands over cups of comforting *chai* for the duration of the party. See chapter 4.
- **Worship the Sunrise as It Touches the Southernmost Tip** (Kanniyakumari, Tamil Nadu): You can't help but be moved by a sense of the miraculous when a simple daily occurrence is venerated by thousands of pilgrims who plunge themselves in the turbulent swell, believing that the tri-oceanic waters at India's southernmost tip are holy, while others delight in the glorious spectacle as though it were a major Bollywood (the nickname for India's booming film industry) premiere. See chapter 5.
- **Lose All Sense of Reality in the City of Light** (Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh): Drifting at dawn on a boat along Varanasi's bathing *ghats* (steps leading down to the river), against a backdrop of 18th- and 19th-century temples and palaces, you will witness some surreal sights—hundreds of pilgrims waist-deep in the Ganges cleansing their souls in its holy waters, while others pound laundry, meditate by staring into the sun, or limber up to wrestle. All the while, bodies burn on the sacred banks, thereby achieving *moksha*—liberation from the eternal cycle of rebirth. See chapter 8.
- **Purchase a Pushkar Passport** (Pushkar, Rajasthan): As you wander around the ghats of Pushkar, the beautifully serene temple town on the edge of the Thar Desert, you will almost certainly be approached by a Brahmin priest to

## 2 CHAPTER 1 • THE BEST OF INDIA

offer *pūja* (prayers) at the sacred lake; in exchange for a “donation” he will then tie a red thread around your wrist—the “passport” you can brandish at the next priest who approaches. This is the commercial side of India’s spirituality, and one you need to be aware of. See chapter 9.

- **Count Time at the Tomb of a Sufi Saint** (Ajmer, Rajasthan): The great Sufi saint Khwaja Muin-ud-Dir Chisti was known as the “protector of the poor,” and his tomb is said to possess the power to grant the wishes of all those who visit. His Dargah Sharif is the most sacred Islamic shrine in India, second in importance only to Mecca. The atmosphere of pure devotion is both ancient and surreal, as is the sight of a long line of men who sit silently counting huge mounds of beads heaped before them—apparently keeping track of time. See chapter 9.
- **Carry the Holy *Granth Sahib* to its Evening Resting Place** (Amritsar, Punjab): In Sikh temples, the *Granth Sahib*—holy book of the Sikhs—is an object of devotion in its own right, and nowhere is this more evocative than at the Golden Temple, the most tangibly spiritual destination in the country. In the evenings men line up to carry the precious *Granth Sahib* from its gold sanctuary at the center of the Amrit Sarovar (“Pool of Nectar”), crossing the **Guru’s Bridge**, which symbolizes the journey of the soul

after death, to the **Akal Takht**, where the Holy Book rests for the night. You can take part in this ceremony by joining the line that forms behind and ahead of the heavy palanquin. Being part of this ancient tradition is a deeply moving experience and indicative of the embracing atmosphere you’ll find in Sikh temples throughout India. See chapter 10.

- **Look into the Eyes of the Dalai Lama** (Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh): There’s a good chance you’ll meet the Dalai Lama in person if you visit Dharamsala, home to the exiled Tibetan government, which fled its homeland in 1959. Arranging a private audience isn’t easy (unless you’re Richard Gere), but if you attend one of his public appearances, you will—like everyone else in the audience—receive a personal blessing. And whatever your convictions, when you look into the eyes of His Holiness, you know you are in the presence of pure energy. See chapter 10.
- **Witness a Thousand Prayers Take Flight on the Wind** (Leh, Ladakh): Take the overland journey from Manali to Leh and enter the stark world of the trans-Himalayas—a breathtakingly beautiful yet desolate lunar-like landscape, with arid peaks and ancient Buddhist monasteries perched on rocky crags. Here prayer flags flutter against an impossibly blue sky, sending their silent prayers to the heavens. See chapter 10.

## 2 The Best Temples, Monuments & Lost Cities

- **Cave Temples at Ajanta & Ellora** (Aurangabad, Maharashtra): Fashioned out of rock by little more than simple hand-held tools, the cave temples at Ajanta (created by Buddhist monks between the 2nd

and 7th c.) and Ellora (a marriage of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain temples, created between the 4th and 9th c.) are the finest examples of rock-cut architecture in India, and deserving of their World Heritage

status. The zenith is **Kailashanath Temple**, effectively a mountain whittled down to a free-standing temple. See “Aurangabad & the Ellora and Ajanta Caves” in chapter 3.

- **Lord Gomateswara Monolith** (Sravanabelagola, Karnataka): One of the oldest (ca. A.D. 918) and most important Jain pilgrimage sites, this 18m (60-ft.) statue of the naked Lord Gomateswara—a representation of Bahubali, son of the first Jain *tirthankara*, said to have sought enlightenment by standing naked and motionless for an entire year—is the tallest monolithic statue on earth. (Don’t miss the 2005 ceremony, when pilgrims will bathe the giant monolith with bucketfuls of milk and honey.) See “Exploring the Hoysala Heartland: Belur, Halebid & Sravanabelagola” in chapter 7.
- **Hampi** (Karnataka): Scattered among the Henri Moore-like boulders in the heart of Karnataka’s rural interior, Hampi was once the royal seat of the powerful Vijayanagar kingdom, its size and wealth drawing comparisons with imperial Rome. Today, the city has crumbled away to just a few starkly beautiful leftovers, but the remote setting couldn’t be more romantic. See “Hampi & the Ruined City of Vijayanagar” in chapter 7.
- **The Temples of Mamallapuram** (Tamil Nadu): A visit to this once-thriving port city of the Pallavas dynasty, who ruled much of South India between the 4th and 9th centuries A.D., is an essential stop on Tamil’s temple tour. The earliest examples of monumental architecture in southern India (the celebrated **Arjuna’s Penance** is the largest relief-carving on earth), these rock-cut shrines are best explored in the morning, leaving

you time to unwind on the pleasant beach and dine on succulent seafood at village cafes for a song. See “Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram)” in chapter 6.

- **Shri Meenakshi-Sundareswarar Temple** (Madurai, Tamil Nadu): Alive with prayers, processions, garland-makers, and joyous devotees who celebrate the mythological romance between the beautiful three-breasted goddess and her mighty Lord Shiva, this colorful and lively complex of shrines, halls, and market stalls is almost Disneyesque, marked as it is by numerous entrance towers tangled with colorful stucco gods, demons, beasts, and mythological heroes. It truly embodies the spirit of Tamil Nadu’s deeply embedded temple culture. See “Madurai” in chapter 6.
- **Taj Mahal** (Agra, Uttar Pradesh): Nothing can prepare you for the beauty of the Taj. The perfect symmetry, the ethereal luminescence, the wonderful proportions, the sheer scale—virtually impossible to imagine from staring at its oft-reproduced image—and the exquisite detailing make this bejeweled monument to love a justifiable wonder of the world. See “Agra” in chapter 8.
- **Fatehpur Sikri** (near Agra, Uttar Pradesh): From the intricacy of the glittering white marble screens that surround the *dargah* (tomb) of Salim Chisti to Pachisi Court, where the emperor played a ludolike game using the ladies of his harem as live pieces, this magnificent ghost city—built almost entirely from red sandstone in 1571 and deserted only 14 years later—is a testament to the secular vision of Akbar, one of the great players in India’s most dynamic dynasty. See “Agra” in chapter 8.

- **The Temples of Khajuraho** (Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh): Built between the 10th and 12th centuries by the Chandela Rajputs, these World Heritage monuments are most famous for the erotic sculptures that writhe across the interiors and exteriors. But even the temple designs—their soaring *shikharas* (spires) serving as metaphoric “stairways to heaven”—are striking, and are considered the apotheosis of medieval Hindu architecture. See “Khajuraho” in chapter 8.
- **Meherangarh Fort** (Jodhpur, Rajasthan): The impenetrable walls of this 15th-century edifice to Rajput valor rise seamlessly from the rocky outcrop on which they were built, literally dwarfing the labyrinthine city at its base; from its crenelated ramparts you enjoy postcard views of the “Blue City” below. In the distance is the grand silhouette of the Umaid Bhawan Palace, heritage hotel and residence of the current maharaja. Within the fort is one of the best palace museums in India. See “Jodhpur” in chapter 9.
- **Jain Temples of Rajasthan & Gujarat** (Ranakpur & Mount Abu, near Udaipur, Rajasthan, and Palitana, Gujarat): The Jain put all their devotional passion (and not inconsiderable wealth) into the creation of the most ornate marble temples; with exquisitely detailed relief carvings covering every inch, they are all simply jaw-droppingly beautiful. Make sure you visit at least one while you’re in India, preferably either the Ranakpur or Dilwara temples in Rajasthan. Or head for Palitana, in Gujarat, where 850 Jain temples and 1,000 shrines top sacred Mount Satrunjaya, “the hill that conquers enemies.” See chapter 9.
- **Golden Temple** (Amritsar, Punjab): Arguably the greatest spiritual monument in India. The name derives from the central gold-plated Hari Mandir—the inner sanctuary featuring gold-plated copper cupolas and white marble walls inlaid with precious stones—which sits at the center of the “Pool of Nectar.” Every day thousands of disciplined devotees pay their respects, touching their heads to the glistening marble floor while singing devotional songs continuously—a wonderful, welcoming, and humbling experience. See “The Golden Temple in Amritsar” in chapter 10.
- **The Sun Temple at Konark** (near Bhubaneswar, Orissa): An enormous war chariot carved from a massive chunk of rock during the 13th century, this masterpiece of Indian temple art is covered with detailed sculpted scenes, from the erotic to the mythological. Guarded by stone elephants and lions, the immense structure is seen as the gigantic chariot of the sun god emerging from the ocean, not far from Orissa’s 500km (300-mile) beach. See “Orissa’s Golden Temple Triangle” in chapter 12.
- **Tabo** (Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh): This 1,005-year-old Buddhist complex houses magnificent frescoes and brilliant stucco and relief figures that recount ancient myths and celebrate the deities and demons that make up the Buddhist pantheon. You’ll need a torch to adequately explore the dark, smoldering halls and shrines lit only by thin shafts of natural light, and brought to life by the resonant chants and ringing of bells by the monks and nuns who populate this sacred center of Tibetan Buddhism. See “Exploring Kinnaur & Spiti” in chapter 10.

### 3 Unique Places to Stay

Not surprisingly, most of these are in Rajasthan, which has almost 80 heritage properties—castles, palaces, forts, and ornate *havelis* (traditional mansions), now hotels with varying degrees of comfort.

- **Taj Mahal Hotel** (Mumbai): George Bernard Shaw famously claimed that after staying here, he no longer had any need to visit the real Taj Mahal in Agra. Built just over a century ago by an Indian industrialist to avenge the whites-only policy of Watson's, then the city's poshest hotel, the Taj remains the most celebrated address in Mumbai, with a seemingly endless stream of Bombabes and playboy millionaires vamping their way through the lobby toward the popular restaurants, shops, and watering holes. See p. 79.
- **Nilaya Hermitage** (Goa): Parisian fashion stylist Claudia Derain and her husband, Hari Ajwani, came to Goa on vacation and—like so many—never left. Together with Goan architect Dean D'Cruz, they've created an *Arabian Nights* fantasy, with only 12 “cosmic-themed” guest suites and gorgeously informal public spaces overlooking paddy fields and coconut-palm groves. Despite being 6km (4 miles) from the nearest beach, Nilaya is one of Goa's most perfect getaways. See p. 115.
- **Surya Samudra Beach Garden** (near Kovalam, Kerala): A small collection of traditional cottages on a terraced hillside overlooking the sea, with direct access to two picture-perfect beaches, Surya Samudra is quite simply the most paradisiacal destination on the Malabar coast. Gazing over the Arabian Sea from your private deck (ask for a cottage near the beach), you will no doubt wish you'd spent your entire vacation here. See p. 162.
- **Green Magic Nature Resort** (Calicut, Northern Kerala): If you've always dreamed of sleeping in a treehouse in the heart of a dense forest, this is the place to do it. Getting to your room is a heart-stopping experience (one treehouse requires climbing into a pulley-rigged bamboo cage and being hoisted 26m/85 ft. up in the air), but once inside the canopy, you luxuriate in plenty of living space, private wraparound balconies, and attached bathrooms, watched only by your neighbors: giant Malabar squirrels. See p. 175.
- **Amarvilas** (Agra, Uttar Pradesh): If you've always dreamed of seeing the Taj Mahal, this is the place to celebrate your achievement. Built within the green belt that surrounds the monument, you can literally see the Taj from your bed, but you'll probably spend just as much time gazing at your immediate surroundings. With its huge reflecting pools, colonnaded courts, terraced lawns, inlaid murals, and pillowed pavilions, this palatial hotel is worth every cent. See p. 271.
- **Rajvilas** (near Jaipur, Rajasthan): This is arguably the best of the Oberoi's flagship Vilas properties. Built like a traditional fortified Rajasthani palace, Rajvilas may not have the history of an authentic heritage hotel, but it offers a level of comfort, luxury, and service these properties simply cannot match, enabling even the most world-weary guest (Bill Clinton loved it) to “live in the princely style of Rajasthan.” See p. 321.

## 6 CHAPTER 1 · THE BEST OF INDIA

- **Deogarh Mahal** (Deogarh, Rajasthan): An ornate 17th-century fort-palace with domed turrets and balconies, personally managed by the charming Thakur of Deogarh, this is one of the most authentic and best-value heritage hotels in Rajasthan. Book the aptly named “Royal” suite, and it’s not hard to feel that all you survey from your private balcony is yours. See p. 347.
- **Lake Palace Hotel** (Udaipur, Rajasthan): Built on an island by the maharana in 1740 as a cool summer retreat (swimming distance from his palace), this is perhaps the most romantic—certainly the most photographed—hotel in India. Whizzing across the waters to your private palace, you’ll feel you’ve finally arrived—and if you’ve booked one of the heritage suites, you have. Floating like a beautiful white ship on the waters of Lake Pichola, the hotel offers good service, comfortable lodging, and picture-perfect 360-degree views—from Udaipur’s statuesque City Palace and the surrounding whitewashed havelis, lit by the first rays of dawn, to the Aravalli Hills, behind which the sun sets. See p. 361.
- **Kankarwa** (Udaipur, Rajasthan): A short stroll from the City Palace, this ancient haveli right on the shores of Lake Pichola is the best budget heritage option in Rajasthan. Run by a family who have resided here for 200 years, rooms cost a mere Rs 650 to Rs 1,200 (\$14–\$26). Book room no. 204—a cool whitewashed room with white bedding, perfectly offset by two touches of color: the blue waters of the lake reflected outside the *jarokha* (window seat), and a red lamp. See p. 363.
- **Devi Garh** (near Udaipur, Rajasthan): If you’re a modern-design enthusiast, this hotel will simply blow you away. An 18th-century Rajput palace-fort, its formidable exterior, towering over the tiny village at its base, remains unchanged. But step inside and you find a totally reinvented minimalist interior, with 14 floors transformed into 23 chic suites that have clearly utilized the talents of the best young Indian designers—all of whom laid to rest the perception that design here reached its apotheosis with the Mughals. It’s an unparalleled modern Indian masterpiece, and a destination in its own right. See p. 365.
- **Umaid Bhawan Palace** (Jodhpur, Rajasthan): Commissioned in the 1930s by Maharaja Umaid Singh (father of the current maharaja, who still resides in the palace) as a poverty-relief exercise to aid his drought-stricken subjects, this cathedral-like palace took some 3,000 laborers 13 years to complete. At the time the largest private residence in the world, the palace remains one of the best examples of the Indo-Saracenic Art Deco style, one of Jodhpur’s top attractions, and a wonderful heritage hotel (soon to be taken over by Aman resorts). See p. 373.
- **Killa Bhawan** (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan): Built entirely from yellow sandstone, **Sonar Qila** (“Golden Fort”) rises like a giant sandcastle from its desert surrounds—this is the world’s only living medieval fort, inhabited by families who have been here for more than 8 centuries. Within the ramparts, Killa Bhawan is a charming five-room guesthouse with rather basic facilities (only two rooms are en-suite) but lovely furnishings and stunning views,

best enjoyed from the rooftop, which is comfortably furnished with mattresses and bolsters. See p. 379.

- **Gangeshwari Suite at the Glasshouse on the Ganges** (Garhwal, Uttaranchal): Just steps away from the raging Ganges River, this thoroughly inventive suite oozes style. The immaculately laid-out sleeping area has a

four-poster canopy bed and antique furniture, while the alfresco bathroom features a tub carved into the rock, with greenery spilling down the walls. You can relax on your private balcony and watch India's holiest river gushing by, or head for a hammock strung between the mango, lychee, and citrus trees. See p. 430.

#### 4 Most Memorable Moments

- **Sharing a Cup of *Chai* with a Perfect Stranger:** You will typically be asked to sit and share a cup of *chai* (tea) a dozen times a day, usually by merchants keen to keep you browsing. Although you may at first be nervous of what this may entail, don't hesitate to accept when you're feeling more comfortable, for while sipping the milky sweet brew (flavored with ginger and cardamom), conversation will flow, and you might find yourself discussing anything from women's rights in India to the individualism that marks Western society.

• **Helping Lord Venkateshwara Repay His Debt to the God of Wealth** (Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh): Tirupati, the richest temple in India, is the most active religious pilgrimage destination on earth, drawing more than 10 million devoted pilgrims every year (more than either Jerusalem or Rome!) who line up for hours, even days, to see the diamond-decorated black stone idol Lord Venkateshwara (aka Vishnu) for just a few seconds. Afterward, you stare in disbelief as vast piles of cash and other contributions are counted by scores of clerks behind a wall of glass. See chapter 6.

- **Watching the *Mela* Moon Rise from Pushkar Palace** (Pushkar,

Rajasthan): The sunset is a spectacular sight on any given evening, but on the evening of the full *mela* moon, hundreds of Hindu pilgrims, accompanied by temple bells and drums, wade into the lake—believed to miraculously cleanse the soul—before lighting clay lamps and setting them afloat on its holy waters, the twinkling lights a surreal reflection of the desert night sky. If you're lucky enough to have bagged a room at Pushkar Palace, you can watch this ancient ritual from a deck chair on the terrace on the banks of the lake. See chapter 9.

- **Gawking and Being Gawked At** (Dungarpur, near Udaipur, Rajasthan): As a woman, you may attract uncomfortably long stares (particularly on public transport), but there are a few moments that you will recall with a wry smile, like the gimlet eye of the toothless old royal retainer as he shows you the explicit Kama Sutra paintings in the hidden cupboard of the 13th-century Juna Mahal—one of Rajasthan's undiscovered gems. See chapter 9.

• **Playing Chicken with a Tata Truck:** The rules of the road (which is almost always single-laned, potholed, and unmarked) are hard to understand, but it would seem that (after the cow,



## 8 CHAPTER 1 · THE BEST OF INDIA

which is of course sacred) the tinsel-covered Tata trucks rule the road, an assumption your hired driver is likely to test—and you will, more than once, find yourself involuntarily closing your eyes as destiny appears to race toward you, blaring its horn.

- **Meeting a Maharajah** (Rajasthan): India must be the only place in the world where you can, armed with a credit card, find yourself sleeping in a king's bed, having dined with the aristocrat whose forebears built, and quite often died for, the castle or palace walls that surround it. While most heritage properties are still owned by India's oldest monarchies, and many still live there, only some (like Mandawa Castle and Deogarh Mahal in Rajasthan, and Nilambagh Palace in Gujarat) are personally managed by these urbane aristocrats. See chapter 9.
- **Unraveling the Intricacies of Hinduism** (Master Paying Guest House, Delhi): Staying here is not only the best-value deal in town, but the sophisticated, charming, and extremely knowledgeable Avnish Puri will take you on a "Hidden Delhi" tour, showing you a world not seen by many outsiders, during which he will unravel Hinduism's spiritual tenets in a profoundly logical way—no mean feat! See chapter 8.

- **Dancing Down the Aisle to a Bollywood Blockbuster:** When the buxom, bee-stung-lipped heroine gyrates to a high-pitched Hindi melody as her strapping stud thrusts his groin across the screen, the movie audience around you is likely to break out in cheers and whistles, even dancing down the aisles, singing along to the banal-and-breezy lyrics. These wonderful, predictable melodramas, in which the hero is always valiant and virile, and the girl always voluptuous and virtuous, are best enjoyed in the high-energy atmosphere of a local cinema (though single females should be wary of going alone).
- **Setting a Candle Adrift on the Sacred Ganges** (Rishikesh, Uttaranchal): By day, Rishikesh is like a spiritual Disneyland, where the commercial excesses of packaged meditation and two-for-one tantric yoga hang heavily about the concrete ashrams, bedecked with gaudy statues of Vishnu and Shiva. But at night, to the accompaniment of hypnotic prayers and harmonious singing, the town undergoes a magical transformation, when thousands of golden marigolds and devotional candles mounted on banana leaves are set adrift on the river, a gloriously simple spectacle that reminds all that this really is a spiritual retreat. See chapter 11.

## 5 Exploring Natural India

- **Watch Cows Sunbathing with Tourists on the Beach** (Goa): While there's plenty of marijuana doing the rounds in Goa, you don't need to smoke a thing to be amused by the mellow cows that wander onto the beach and chill out among the tourists and hawkers. Chewing their cud while

seemingly gazing out to sea, these cows really take the Goan motto, "*Sossegarde*" ("Take it easy"), to heart. See chapter 4.

- **Ply the Backwaters on a *Kettuvallam*** (Alleppey & Kumarakom, Kerala): Aboard your private houseboat you aimlessly drift past villages, temples, and churches,



watching as village children, unperturbed by your drifting presence, play at the water's edge while elephants and water buffalo wade at will. Though the facilities might strike the well-heeled as basic, you're looked after by a private team (guide, cook, and pilot) who manage to be both discreetly invisible and at your beck and call. See chapter 5.

- **Quench Your Thirst with Fresh Coconut Juice on an Uninhabited Island** (Lakshadweep): One of India's best-kept secrets, the 36 atolls and coral reefs that make up the remote union territory of Lakshadweep (an extension of the better-known Maldives) are rated among the best diving destinations in Asia. Only 10 of the islands are populated, almost exclusively by Malayalam-speaking Muslims who make their living from fishing and harvesting coconut coir. These relaxed islanders seldom see outsiders but are supremely welcoming, happily climbing a towering coconut tree to help you quench your thirst. See chapter 5.
- **Wake to Hear a Herd of Elephants Approaching** (Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala): The best way to experience this park—famous for its herds of wild elephants—is with the privately run Periyar Tiger Trail. Accompanied by a naturalist and a game ranger armed with a rifle, you are taken farther into the tourist zone than any other operator is allowed to penetrate. What's more, you are looked after by a team of reformed poachers, who skillfully track and spot animals, carry all the gear, strike camp, cook, clean and—most important—stand sentinel throughout the night when the

danger of being trampled by elephants becomes a serious risk. See chapter 5.

- **Immortalize a Wild Tiger from the Back of an Elephant** (Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh): With the densest population of tigers of any park in India, you are practically guaranteed a sighting at this relatively low-key, remote part of Madhya Pradesh. But it's the approach that's so exciting—elephant *mahouts* set off at dawn to track the royal cats. As soon as they've spotted one, you rendezvous with your pachyderm, who then takes you within striking distance of this most royal of cats. The tiger—unperturbed by the presence of an elephant—will then strike a pose of utter indifference for your camera. See chapter 8.
- **Pick a Picture-Perfect Beach** (Goa, Kerala): India has some of the world's best beaches, most of them on the Malabar Coast. Easily accessed, **Asvem** (northern Goa) is an idyllic haven that's drawn Olive Ridley turtles for centuries, yet remains off the well-beaten tourist track. **Palolem** (southern Goa), a gorgeous crescent of sand backed by coconut palms and a handful of laid-back shacks where you can feast on fresh fish and bottles of cold beer, is deservedly India's most photographed beach. From here, time allowing, you should head over the border to beautiful and remote **Ohm** beach (Gokam, Karnataka). In Kerala, the competition is equally stiff, but we award the picture-perfect prize to the resort beaches at **Marari** and **Surya Samudra**. See chapters 4 and 5.
- **Find Divinity in *Devbhumi*, "Land of the Gods"** (Spiti to Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh): The

## 10 CHAPTER 1 • THE BEST OF INDIA

stark rust-colored snowcapped slopes in the Indo-Tibetan regions of Kinnaur, Spiti, and Lahaul are the stuff adventurers' dreams are made of, offering sublime mountainscapes, flower-filled valleys, terrifying roads, atmospheric Tibetan Buddhist *gompas* (monasteries),

and high-altitude villages that seem to cling to the mountainsides. Only recently opened to visitors, the region is one of the most profoundly beautiful in the world, but the drive is not for the fainthearted. See chapter 10.

## 6 The Best Ayurvedic Pampering

- **Pousada Touma** (Goa): Loved by top Indian director Mira Nair as well as jet-setting French designer Michèle Klein, this intimate 12-suite resort, fashioned entirely from distinctively Goan laterite stone, offers a small, exclusive Ayurvedic center—the ideal place to finish off a day spent on the beach, with a professional doctor, two excellent treatment rooms, and an exhaustive range of Ayurvedic packages. An excellent in-house restaurant offers tailor-made Ayurvedic meals. See p. 116.
- **The Marari Beach** (Mararikulam, Kerala): Ayurveda is taken very seriously at this attractive beach resort in South India, not far from Kerala's tantalizing backwaters. The well-stocked Ayurvedic center is run by two physicians, who dispense sound medical advice as well as treatments, and your program is backed up with special Ayurvedic meals at the resort's restaurant. Or forgo the rules and just head for the beach, cocktail in hand. See p. 148.
- **Kumarakom Lake Resort** (Kumarakom, Kerala): The swankiest of Kumarakom's retreats, this has an extensive Ayurvedic spa—one of Kerala's most sophisticated, catering primarily to the well-heeled globe-trotter—but there's more besides, like the exquisite traditionally styled teak-and-rosewood houses with open-air garden bathrooms, a fabulous restaurant, and superslick service. See p. 145.
- **Somatheeram** (Southern Kerala): This shabby-chic center, carved out of red sandy soil and perched on a terraced cliff overlooking a beach, is more hospital than hotel, but it has been inundated with awards for "Best Ayurvedic Centre" (mostly from Kerala's Tourism Department). Ayurvedic therapy is the primary reason to book here, joining the many European "patients" who shuffle around in pastel dressing gowns, serene expressions on their tanned faces. See p. 161.
- **Poovar Island Resort** (Southern Kerala): It's the location as much as anything that sets this stylish resort apart. Set amid dense coconut groves and banana trees, this island resort is only accessible by boat, and you can elect to stay on a floating cottage built of Malaysian teak and coconut timber. There's not much to do but idle away your time watching fishermen from your private veranda or pool, and entrust yourself to the excellent bamboo-walled Ayurvedic center, staffed by two doctors and a handful of top-notch no-nonsense masseurs. See p. 161.
- **Shalimar Spice Garden Resort** (Kerala): Not far from Periyar Tiger Reserve, this lovely inland resort occupies a 2.4-hectare (6-acre) plantation scented by exotic

spices. Over and above the enchanting Euro-chic accommodations designed by Italian owner-architect Maria Angela Fernhof is an intimate Ayurvedic center drawing a regular European clientele. Built according to traditional specifications, with a stone floor, handmade brick walls, and an open fire for heating the medicated oils, the small space is always filled with the aroma of coconut oil. See p. 170.

- **Wildflower Hall, Mashobra** (near Shimla, Himachal Pradesh): The *pièce de résistance* at what once was the mountain retreat of Lord Kitchener and is today the most beautiful resort in the Himalayas is the spa—not only because the highly trained therapists offer the ultimate rub-down (Balinese, Thai, Swedish, Ayurvedic—and

that's just for starters), but it takes place while you stare out blissfully at snowcapped peaks and a magnificent deodar valley, swirling with mists. See p. 399.

- **Ananda-in-the-Himalayas** (near Rishikesh, Uttaranchal): The 1,951-sq.-m (21,000-sq.-ft.) Wellness Center at this destination spa resort, located high above the Ganges, is rated one of the best in the world. This reputation is well-earned—thanks not only to its ultra-efficient team of therapists, masseuses, and yoga instructors, but also because you are totally pampered from the moment you wake (to a steaming cup of honey, lemon, and ginger) until you retire to a bath (where a pre-lit candle heats fragrant essential oils) and a bed (warmed by a hot-water bottle). See p. 429.

## 7 The Best Eating & Drinking Experiences

- **Bumping into a Bollywood Idol** (Mumbai): Nowhere in India is dining more rewarding than in Mumbai, where there are literally thousands of restaurants representing every kind of Indian cuisine. But if it's star-gazing you're after, head for places like the **Olive Bar and Kitchen** or **Shatranj Napoli**. Alternatively, hang out at **Leopold Café**; casting agents looking for foreigners to work as extras frequently scan the clientele at this favored travelers' hangout. See chapter 3.
- **Eating a Piping-Hot Sev Puri on Chowpatty Beach** (Mumbai): Mumbai is famous for its delicious street food, but every city has street-side vendors that tempt you with tantalizing smells. It's not always easy to figure out which street foods are safe, however (outlets with huge lines are a good bet)—if you don't feel secure about it, it's better to forgo this

particular experience or opt for restaurants that offer a safer version of "street" food. See chapter 3.

- **Dining with Ancient Delhi at Your Feet** (Delhi, Uttar Pradesh): Head for **Thai Wok**, the designer-chic rooftop restaurant with great views of the ancient Qutb Minar—the sandstone Victory Tower built by Qutbuddin Aibak in 1193. Reached via an ancient elevator and a short set of stairs, the artful alfresco setting includes a walled area with cushioned seating under wind-blown canopies; reserve well ahead to sit here. Seafood dishes are exceptional; try red snapper in chili-sour sauce, or prawns stir-fried with fresh green chilies and sweet basil. See p. 258.
- **Eating with Your Hands:** Though it may initially go against the grain, there's something immensely rewarding about digging into a delicious meal with your hands. Indians generally do,

## 12 CHAPTER 1 · THE BEST OF INDIA

and—at least once—you should follow suit. Note that ideally you only use your right hand, and in the North, where the food is “drier,” you are traditionally not supposed to dirty more than the first two digits; in the South you may use the whole hand. See the appendix.

- **Sipping a *Lassi* Thick with Chunks of Banana:** A delicious drink of liquefied sweetened yogurt, this is almost a meal in a glass and should definitely be sampled (some of the best we’ve tried were in Goa and Jaipur). Do, however, make sure that no water has been added (including ice), and beware the *bhang lassi*—spiced with marijuana, it can make the usually surreal scenes of India a little too out of this world.
- **Sitting Around a Bonfire under a Desert Sky** (Rajasthan): There’s nothing quite like eating a superb meal around a raging campfire in

the peace of the desert night. Camel and horseback safaris are run out of the Shekawati, Bikaner, Pushkar, and Jaisalmer. If you opt for the latter, the **Royal Desert camp**, a permanent tented camp with en-suite tents near Sam’s Dunes, is run by Fort Rajwada, with food supplied by the team of chefs that cooks up a storm at Trio, Jaisalmer’s best restaurant. See chapter 9.

- **Sampling Tibetan Butter Tea with a Buddhist Lama** (Leh, Ladakh): Many people gag at the taste of butter tea, made with salt and—you guessed it—a good dollop of the clarified butter known as ghee. It’s an acquired taste, but if you get the hang of it, sipping the buttery concoction with a friendly Buddhist monk when you visit one of the many monasteries tucked in the lunar landscapes around Leh is a truly memorable experience. See chapter 10.

## 8 The Best Savvy Traveler Tips

- **“You pay what you like”:** This rather annoying response from guides, drivers, and rickshaw-*wallahs* to the question “How much will it cost?” will no doubt end with at least one of you feeling very disappointed. Try to find out how much something should cost *before* you enter into this dialogue (we’ve tried to advise this wherever possible), and always negotiate the fare or rate upfront. (Note that “I come later” is another irritating response, this time to your declining a service, and you will need to remain firm or prepare to go through the entire experience again.)
- **“Just look, no buy”:** You will be urged to enter shops from all corners in both explicit and less obvious ways—your driver, guide,

even the seemingly innocent bystander offering assistance, are almost all operating on the ubiquitous commission system, and whatever they make on the deal is added to the quoted price. Note that to avoid this kind of hassle, look for the fixed-rate shops or those that mark their wares with prices. But beware of government emporiums with fixed rates—these are sadly often outrageously expensive.

- **“We look; we look”:** This response from a rickshaw-*wallah* or driver usually means that the person either doesn’t know where you’ve asked him to take you, or you’ll end up somewhere with a similar name but nothing else to recommend it (Hotel *Chandra*, for example, rather than Hotel

*Chand*). Prebook your accommodations whenever you can so that you don't have to deal with touts and hawkers when you arrive. And be aware that a hotel or guesthouse that is successful will often have a rival opening within the year with a confusingly similar name.

- **“So where are you from, good gentleman?”** (or more commonly, “Coming from?”): You will be asked this often, so prepare yourself. One of the possible reasons Indians kick-start conversations this way is that it may in the past have indicated caste or social position; whatever the reason, engage in the opener—it's far preferable to living in a five-star hotel cocoon.
- **“Hashish, taxi, guide, young girls?”**: In the well-traveled parts of India, you will be inundated with offers of assistance; again, the best response is to doggedly desist in what is essentially a game of endurance, and certainly ignore those unsolicited offers that are illicit—these can carry a hefty penalty, including a lengthy jail sentence.
- **“Cof-fay, chai; cof-fay, chai; cof-fay, chai?”**: This incessant call given by the *chai-wallah* wandering the corridors of your train will put to rest any romantic notions about the relaxation of train travel. Note that you will be most comfortable aboard the overnight **Rajdhani Express**, which connects all the major cities, while the best day-time train is the **Shatabdi Express** (book Chair Class). Time allowing, you should definitely book a “toy train” to the hill stations of Shimla and Darjeeling—the latter approach is so spectacular it has been named a World Heritage Site.
- **“You wait, no problem”**: Finally, we can't emphasize enough how important it is to simply relax and accept whatever's going on around you. Many Indians subscribe to the philosophy that life is destiny, and getting uptight or flying into a rage usually won't solve much. You'll have a far better vacation if you simply give in to the moment and enjoy the experience; after all, the only aspect you have control over is your response.