

Agra, Varanasi and the Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj

Trip Code: PXKM

Version: PXKM Agra, Varanasi and the Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj





HIGHLIGHTS

- Three nights, two days at the Kumbh Mela, staying at a fixed camp on the festival site
- Experience the magical aarti ceremony on the banks of the Ganges at Varanasi
- Visit Agra's incomparable Taj Mahal at sunrise

Sarnath, Chunnar Fort, Ayodhya and a day of sightseeing in Lucknow

AT A GLANCE

- 12 days touring and sightseeing
- Join at Delhi

ACCOMMODATIONS & MEALS

- 12 Breakfasts
- 3 Lunches
- 3 Dinners
- 9 nights Hotel
- 3 nights Fixed Camp

VIEW DATES, PRICES & BOOK YOUR HOLIDAY HERE

Introduction

The Maha Kumbh Mela, celebrated every twelve years in the north Indian city of Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) is the biggest and most colourful religious gathering on Earth with millions of Hindu pilgrims expected to attend the event in January 2025. Timed according to the relative astrological positions of Jupiter, the sun and the moon, the festival is marked for many by a ritual dip in the waters at the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Sarasvati rivers. The devout believe that bathing in this place and at this time cleanses them of their sins. This sensational holiday includes 3 nights and 2 full days at the Kumbh Mela at the peak of the festival. Staying at a comfortable, private fixed camp at the heart of the showground, this will provide a unique opportunity to experience one of the greatest shows on Earth. There are sideshows, fairs, street vendors, strolling players and storytellers, sadhus and holy men, followers of a bewildering array of different Hindu deities. Naked, ash-covered Naga sadhus as well as Urdhwavahurs, Parivajakas, Shirshasins and Kalpvasis, each with their own devotional practices, will vie for your attention.

But there's more to this holiday than the Kumbh Mela. We start out with a day of sightseeing amongst the temples and bazaars of Delhi, before taking the early Vande Bharat Express train to Varanasi, where we will attend the candle-lit aarti ceremony that takes place each evening on the ghats beside the Ganges. We will also take a boat ride on the river at dawn on the following morning to observe the pilgrims as they come to bathe in the holy waters. Nearby Sarnath and the impressive Chunar Fort are also on our tick-list as we make our way to Prayagraj. Then, after our time at the Kumbh Mela, we will visit Ayodhya on the banks of Saryu River (another Hindu holy place) and spend a day at Lucknow, the City of Nawabs, sacred to people of the Muslim faith. Finally, we will visit Agra and experience both the magic of the Taj Mahal at dawn and the sheer presence of the commanding, red sandstone Agra Fort.

A holiday for those seeking complete sensory immersion into the fascinating cultural and religious experience that is northern India.

Is this holiday for you?

This touring and sightseeing adventure holiday incorporates some of the highlights of northern India into just less than 2 weeks and provides a taste of the Subcontinent's amazing culture, history and religious pageantry. There is a fair amount of travelling, as we journey between Delhi, Varanasi, Prayagraj and

Agra. However, using a private, air-conditioned minibus, the effect of this is kept to a minimum. The holiday includes some quite leisurely exploration of city streets and cultural sites in foot.

Itinerary

Version: PXKM Agra, Varanasi and the Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj



Meet at the group hotel in Delhi. A group transfer from Delhi Airport is provided.

Your holiday starts at the hotel in Delhi and a group transfer from Delhi Airport is provided. The neat and tidy group hotel is in a busy market street close to Connaught Place, the bustling heart of New Delhi. Afternoon at leisure and in the evening your guide will take dinner with you and will provide an informal briefing about the days ahead.



Accommodation

Hotel

DAY 2

Tour of Old Delhi and its Hindu cultural sites.

After breakfast at the hotel, we will go out to explore the old part of Delhi. We will visit the great Jama Masjid, the principal mosque of Old Delhi. Built in the year 1656 AD by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, it is the largest and best-known mosque in India. The courtyard of the mosque can hold up to twenty five thousand worshippers. We can then take an exciting rickshaw ride through the nearby colourful old bazaar of Chandni Chowk and see (but not visit) the Red Fort, which has the same Mughal architecture and structure as Agra Fort (which we will visit later in the tour). Also on our list today is the Hindu Temple Complex of Akshardham, built on the banks of the Yamuna River and boasting 234 ornate pillars, 20,000 statues and numerous arches. We spend a second night at our central hotel.

Meals: B



Accommodation

Hotel

DAY 3

Early train to Varanasi and evening aarti ceremony on the Ganges.

We have an early wake up and breakfast before going to the nearby New Delhi Railway Station to catch the 0600 train to Varanasi. This is the new Vande Bharat express train service and for the eight hours of the journey we will be treated to the best of the Indian railway experience as we watch the fascinating kaleidoscope of the Indian landscape pass by. Arriving in Varanasi in the early afternoon, we will transfer to our hotel in the city and have time for lunch before taking a motorised rickshaw (tuk-tuk) ride to the banks of the Ganges. Here, we will have a short guided tour of alleyways and temples and have some time to take in the atmosphere of this spiritual place before boarding a boat which provide the best viewpoint for the aarti ceremony. Taking place on the wide stone steps known as ghats, where pilgrims take the waters and perform their pujas, the aarti ceremony involves seven priests who carry butter lamps and chant and sing in praise of Mother Ganga. As a part of the ceremony, thousands of small floating butter lamps are prepared, each one representing the hopes and prayers of the individuals who push them out into the gentle current. We return to our hotel by tuk-tuk.

Meals: B



Accommodation

Hotel

DAY 4

Sunrise sail on the Ganges, Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum and Sarnath visit.

Leaving the hotel in the early morning pre-dawn darkness we make our way by bus through the quiet city streets back to the ghats where our boat is waiting. Afloat on the river we can enjoy the sun rise over the Ganges and the ghats. We are rowed slowly along the river, watching the activity of the ghats as the devotees come down to the waters; all aspects of life are on display as people make their offerings and prayers, wash themselves and their clothes and even cremate their loved ones on the banks of the most important river in Hinduism. From the river, the patchwork arrangement of temples and houses have a magical quality. Returning to our hotel for breakfast we have some free time to rest or to shop for souvenirs including silk goods for which Varanasi is famous. In the late morning, we will visit the museum of Bharat Kala Bhavan which houses a vast collection of paintings, Hindu and Buddhist sculptures and other materials of archeological importance. After lunch we will visit the Buddhist site of Sarnath with its impressive stone stupa, temples and museums. Overnight in Varanasi.

Meals: B



Accommodation

Hotel

DAY 5

Drive via Chunar Fort to Prayagraj. Comfortable fixed camp at the heart of the Mela.

It's a drive of around five hours today to the site of the 2025 Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj (previously known as Allahabad) but we will break the journey to pay a visit to the very impressive Chunar Fort which rises above the Ganges just about half an hour south of Varanasi. Built of local red sandstone and rebuilt

several times, the fort has a long and fascinating history; supposedly established by Vikramaditya of Ujjah (56 BC) and successively occupied by prominent historical figures including Sher Shah Suri, the Emperor Akbar, Aurangzeb, the Nawabs of Avadh and, in 1764, the British Raj. After our visit to the fort we continue our journey westwards to Prayagraj where we check in at our comfortable, private fixed camp accommodation at the heart of the Kumbh Mela site.

Meals: **BLD**



Accommodation

Fixed Camp

DAY 6

Prayagraj - at the Kumbh Mela.

Now properly called Prayagraj, this city has been the site of religious fairs for centuries and these have taken place annually at Triveni Sangam at the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers. A third mythical river, the Saraswati, joins the other two rivers at this point. Since the 19th Century, this site has been one of the four venues of the Kumbh Mela. The full (Maha) Kumbh Mela takes place on a 12-year cycle and the last time this took place at Prayagraj in 2013 some 30 million people attended; the largest peaceful gathering in the world. The festival is marked by a ritual dip in the Ganges on several auspicious days, determined according to the Hindu lunar-solar calendar. The festival is also a celebration of community and commerce with markets and preachings, charitable food handouts and spectacularly colourful entertainment. Options to explore with our guide include the Hanuman Temple, Akshya Vat and Allahabad Fort. We will spend the day at the festival with lunch and dinner at the camp.

Meals: **BLD**



Accommodation

Fixed Camp

DAY 7

Prayagraj - at the Kumbh Mela - Makar Sankranti.

After breakfast at the camp, we will head out again to experience the Mela. Today is the first of the 'royal bathing' days, known as Makar Sankranti and, if you are aiming to take a holy dip at Triveni Sangam, today is the day to do it. Hindu mythology suggests that water of the Ganges turns to nectar on this day and a ritual bathing will take away all sin and ensure salvation. We will also visit the camps of some of the usually fourteen separate 'Akharas' (groups of sadhus and other religious persons, followers of different Hindu deities; Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma and others). We spend a third night at our fixed camp accommodation.

Meals: **BLD**



Accommodation

Fixed Camp

DAY 8

Drive to Ayodhya, the birthplace of Prince Rama. Afternoon sightseeing.

After breakfast we will say goodbye to the River Ganges and head north across country to Ayodhya, a drive of around four hours. Situated on the banks of Sarayu River, Ayodhya is one of the most sacred places in India for Hindus and was called Saket in ancient times. This place is mentioned in several legends and stories including the 24,000 verse Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana. We will have a sightseeing tour after lunch in Ayodhya and visit the newly built Ram Janmabhoomi Temple. According to the Ramayana, Prince Rama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, grew up beside the Sarayu River. We will also visit the 10th Century Hanuman Garhi Temple, dedicated to the 'monkey god' Hanuman. Overnight in Ayodhya.

Meals: B



Accommodation

Hotel

DAY 9

Drive to Lucknow and afternoon at leisure. Optional sightseeing tour.

After breakfast we will have a three-hour drive to Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh and a place often referred to as the 'City of Nawabs'. Lucknow is one of the most pristine and multicultural cities of India and flourished during the 18th and the 19th centuries as an artistic and cultural centre under the reign of the Nawabs of Awadh. Arriving in the city at lunchtime, we will check in at the excellent group hotel and the remainder of the day is at leisure. The city does have various architectural and historical highlights and for those who are keen to explore a short sightseeing tour on foot can be arranged.

Meals: **B**



Accommodation

Hotel

DAY 10

A day for sightseeing in Lucknow, the City of Nawabs.

Lucknow is known for its Nawabi heritage and outstanding architecture, but it's also a total foodie's

paradise. From royal relishes to kebabs, paans and biryanis, you never know what culinary gems you'll find tucked within Lucknow's narrow alleyways. Our full day tour will include visits to several of the city's impressive 'imambaras' which are places of Muslim worship built by the Nawabs in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Muslim people from all over the region come to the imambaras each year to celebrate the religious festival of Muharram. Tombs and temples, domed and gilded in silver and gold, with ornate interiors featuring floral designs and chandeliers are all part of today's richness. We will also see The Residency, home to officials of the British Raj at the start of the 19th century, the imposing gateway of Rumi Darwaza, the villa and garden of Sikandar Bagh and the stately gardens and monument of Ambedkar Park. Overnight in Lucknow.

Meals: B



Accommodation

Hotel

DAY 11

Drive from Lucknow to Agra.

There's no great rush this morning, so we can enjoy a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, before boarding our vehicle for the five-hour drive westwards to Agra. Arriving in Agra we check in at our hotel and have some free time. The earliest reference to Agra can be found in the epic Mahabharata where it is referred to as the Agravana. It was in the medieval period, however, that Agra rose to prominence as the capital of the Mughals when the city was beautified with gardens, water falls, bathhouses and canals. Today, the bustling streets of Agra boast a thriving carpet industry, leather workers and of course marble and sandstone sculptors, some of who claim to be descendants of the craftsmen who helped build the great Taj Mahal.

Meals: **B**



Accommodation

Hote

DAY 12

Visit the Taj Mahal at sunrise, then explore Agra Fort. Late afternoon train to Delhi.

Yet another highlight of the tour, this morning at sunrise, we visit the Taj Mahal - one of the man-made 'seven wonders' of the world which took 20,000 people 22 years to build. Its dazzling white walls and dome are inlaid with 28 different types of precious and semi-precious stones, some of which pick out verses from the Koran in highly decorative script. The Taj Mahal itself is a mausoleum for Mumtaz the wife of its builder Shah Jahan and is set in tranquil gardens. After our visit, we return to our hotel for a late breakfast and a wash and brush up, before heading out to see the Agra Fort, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. Commanding gates, fashioned in red stone, as well as an excellent view of the Taj

Mahal, just two and a half kilometres away, are highlights of this impressive site. We will return to Delhi on the late afternoon Gatiman Express train and spend our final night of the holiday at our airport-accessible hotel.

Meals: B



Accommodation

Hote

DAY 13

Your holiday ends after breakfast. A group transfer to Delhi airport is provided.

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Meals: B

Holiday Information

What's Included

- A professional English-speaking local leader
- Delhi Airport group transfers on the arrival and departure days
- All land transport involved in the itinerary
- All accommodation as described
- Meals as detailed in the Meal Plan
- Park and monument entrance fees
- Guided sightseeing during two days at the Kumbh Mela
- Guided sightseeing tours in Delhi Varanasi Lucknow and Agra

What's not Included

- Travel insurance
- Delhi Airport transfers (other than group transfers) on arrival and departure days
- Indian Visa
- Tips for local staff
- Some meals as detailed in the Meal Plan

Joining Arrangements & Transfers

The group will meet at at the hotel in Delhi on Day 1 of the Land Only itinerary.

A single group transfer is provided from Delhi Airport on Day 1 of the Land Only itinerary and back to the same airport on the final day of the Land Only itinerary.

Anyone may join the group transfers by prior arrangement. Travelling as a group or on public transport saves energy. If this is not practical, we can provide private transfers at an additional cost. Taxis are also available.

Hotel contact details and an emergency number will be provided with your booking confirmation.

Meal Plan

There is a total of 13 breakfasts, 3 lunches and 3 dinners included. The tour guide will accompany the group for all meals, both at the group hotels and at other cafes and restaurants, and will if needed assist with choosing and ordering meals at those places where you will pay directly. This arrangement of included meals means you are to a greater extent free to choose what you want to eat and can take full advantage of the excellent Indian food on offer.

Food & Water

It is not recommended to drink untreated water from the taps. You should take purification tablets or a filter bottle (such as a <u>Water-To-Go bottle</u>) to treat your water. We do not encourage the purchasing of single use plastic bottles.

Part of the experience of a visit to India is sampling the excellent local food. Indian cuisine offers a wide choice of dishes, much more variety than the 'curries' we are used to in Indian restaurants at home and the naan breads are like nothing you'll have experienced. Whether the food is presented as a dinner buffet or as a set menu, there will always be vegetarian options. In some place, there will also be familiar international dishes. Breakfasts include cereals, bread, possibly in the form of local 'rotis', eggs, hard-boiled or omelette, often one or two delicious, spicy Indian breakfast options, fruit, juice, hot water for tea or coffee. Lunches will usually be at a restaurant where you can choose what you want - the guide will help with this.

Special Diets

Whilst we can cater for vegetarians, albeit sometimes with a more limited choice, we cannot always provide special diets. Due to the nature of some of the trips that we operate and the countries in which we operate them, it can be very hard (and sometimes impossible) to cater for a wide range of dietary choices and you may have to supplement your diet with food/snacks from home. If you have specific dietary requirements please do speak to our sales team and they will be able to advise you whether or not we will be able to offer your specific choice. Please note that we are unable to provide separate menus and cannot accept liability for any problems arising from special dietary requirements or intolerances.

Accommodation

We will have a 9 nights in neat and tidy tourist-class hotels (generally 3-star) in Delhi, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Lucknow and Agra. There are also 3 nights at a private tented camp at the Kumbh Mela location in Prayagraj where the accommodation is twin-share with proper beds and bedding, private toilet facilities including hot running water with shower and towels. The tents have electricity, lighting and carpeted floors and are lockable. Meals at the camp are included and taken in a separate dining tent. All accommodation is allocated on a twin-sharing basis. If you are travelling by yourself, you will be paired up with another single client of the same sex. Depending upon availability it may be possible to arrange single rooms for the hotel nights. For hotel prices and single supplement costs please refer to the dates and prices page of the trip on our website.

Group Leader & Support Staff

The group will be accompanied by an experienced professional leader throughout and specialist cultural guides will be brought in when sightseeing in Delhi, Varanasi, Lucknow and Agra, and during the time the group spends at the Kumbh Mela. There will also be a private, air-conditioned vehicle and driver for all road transfers.

Spending Money

Approximately £400 (or the equivalent in US dollars or euros) should be allowed for miscellaneous expenses including the meals you will pay for directly, as well as tips for your guides (allow approximately £80-£100) and for beer, soft drinks, etc. There will be opportunities to buy souvenirs on this trip. It is not necessary to purchase local currency (Indian Rupees) before you travel. Sterling, US dollars and euros are readily exchanged in Delhi. Since you will be changing the majority of your spending money into local currency during the first couple of days in Delhi, we recommend taking this in cash. Credit cards can be used to purchase many goods in the cities and are particularly useful for more expensive souvenirs. It is possible to withdraw cash (rupees only) from cash machines in certain banks in the cities using credit and debit cards.

Guidance on Tipping

Tipping is an accepted and expected part of Indian culture, although you should only tip for services which are well done. We recommend that tips to your guides and driver be made from the group as a whole and that the group decides together on an appropriate amount. Your guide will help with sundry tipping; bell boys, other hotel staff, toilet attendants, lunchtime restaurant staff, festival staff and railway porters. This means you don't need to concern yourself with who to tip and who not to tip. Your guide will set up a tip 'kitty' for this and you will probably be asked to contribute 4000 rupees (£40) each for this at the start of the trip. Separately from this, you will need to tip the driver who will be with you for much of the trip. And you will need to tip your guide. As a rough guide we suggest that £80-£100 per person (depending on group size) will allow you to pay reasonable tips.

Baggage Allowance

You should restrict your luggage to one main travel bag plus a small daypack to carry cameras, binoculars, water etc. A robust holdall or a piece of luggage fitted with wheels is appropriate for this kind of trip.

Group Size & Holiday Status

For each holiday there is a minimum number of participants required to enable it to go ahead. Once the minimum number is reached, the trip status will change from 'Available' to 'Guaranteed to run'. You can check the trip status for each departure in 'Dates and Prices' table. Other than in exceptional circumstances, we will not cancel a trip once it has achieved this guaranteed to run status and so you are free to proceed with your international flight booking and other travel arrangements.

General Information

Passport & Visas

The information that we provide is for UK passport holders. A passport with 6 months remaining validity at the end of your stay is generally required, and you should have at least 2 blank pages for each country that you visit.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you have the correct travel documents and visas for your holiday. Please ensure that you check for the latest advice before travel. For the most up to date information on entry requirements, please visit the <u>UK Government website</u>.

Visa India

Most nationalities, including travellers from the UK, the USA and many European countries can apply for their Indian Visa online through the **E-Visa Application** process. You must make your application at least four days prior to departure. Please download the detailed information document for details of how to apply for your visa: <u>Visa India PDF</u>

Health & Vaccinations

If you have a severe allergy please inform the KE office before you travel. We will do all we can to help, but we cannot guarantee an allergy free environment on KE trips. You will need to carry your own treatment for the allergy with you, as 'adrenaline auto-injectors' are not carried as standard by KE leaders and staff. You should inform your leader on arrival of your allergy, and let them know where you keep your adrenaline pen.

VACCINATIONS

You should contact your doctor or travel clinic to check whether you require any specific vaccinations or other preventive measures. You should be up to date with routine courses and boosters as recommended in the UK e.g. diphtheria-tetanus-polio and measles-mumps-rubella, along with hepatitis A and typhoid. A good online resource is <u>Travel Health Pro.</u>

Dengue fever is a known risk in places visited. It is a tropical viral disease spread by daytime biting mosquitoes. There is currently no vaccine or prophylaxis available and therefore the best form of prevention is to avoid being bitten. We recommend you <u>take precautions to avoid mosquito bites</u>.

Zika virus has been confirmed as active in this country. It is a tropical viral disease spread by daytime biting mosquitoes. There is currently no vaccine or prophylaxis available and therefore the best form of prevention is to avoid being bitten. We recommend you take the usual precautions to avoid mosquito bites. The mosquitoes that transmit ZIKV are unlikely to be found above 2,000m altitude. For more information, visit the website of the National Travel Network and Centre (NaTHNaC) at https://travelhealthpro.org.uk

Currency

The currency of India is the Indian Rupee.

Climate

Early in the year in northern India it will be dry and pleasantly cool with maximum daytime temperatures of around 20 degrees centigrade and nighttime temperatures dropping as low as 10 degrees centigrade. It is a great time of year to visit.

Travel Aware

As a reputable tour operator, KE supports the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's 'Travel Aware' campaign to enable British citizens to prepare for their journeys overseas. The 'Travel Aware' website provides a single, authoritative source of advice for all kinds of travellers and we recommend that prior to travel, all KE clients visit the official UK Government website at travelaware.campaign.gov.uk and read the FCDO Travel Advice for their chosen destination. North Americans can also check out the U.S. Department of State website: www.travel.state.gov for essential travel advice and tips.

KE treat the safety and security of all clients as the most important aspect of any trip we organise. We would not run any trip that we did not consider reasonably safe. Should the FCDO advise against travel for any reason, we will contact everyone booked to travel to discuss the situation. We receive regular updates direct from the FCDO and are in constant touch with our contacts on the ground. If you have any questions about government travel advice, please call our office.

Single Use Plastic

KE do not encourage the use of single use plastic items. We are ensuring that our agents all over the world are working together to reduce the problem and educate those around them. We are leading by example in our KE office by reducing our plastic use.

Books

- India Lonely Planet
- Guide India The Rough Guide
- The Kumbh Mela Mark Tulley
- Kumbha: The Traditionally Modern Mela Nityananda Misra

Maps

- India North West Reise Know-How Verlag. 1:1,300,000
- India North East Reise Know-How Verlag. 1:1,300,000

Travel Insurance

It is an essential condition of joining a holiday with KE Adventure Travel that you have a valid travel insurance policy to cover the cost of medical treatment and to protect the value of your holiday in the event of cancellation. When taking out insurance please ensure the policy you choose covers you for the activities and altitude included in your itinerary.

For appropriate insurance cover we recommend Campbell Irvine Direct. Please go to our <u>Travel Insurance</u> page for further information and to get a quote.

Equipment Information

Equipment List

The following checklist should help you with your packing. As a general rule, you should always try to keep the weight of your equipment to a minimum.

Please bring the following items:

- Comfortable walking shoes or trainers
- Lightweight walking trousers
- Light, long-sleeved shirt with collar)
- Light waterproof jacket
- Light fleece jumper or jacket
- Casual clothing for evenings
- Travel clothes
- Sunhat
- Sunglasses
- Sun protection (including total bloc for lips, nose etc.)

- Small daypack 20 to 25 litres
- Water bottles 1 litre (x2)
- Water purification tablets
- Washbag and toiletries
- Antibacterial handwash
- Basic First Aid Kit including: antiseptic cream, throat lozenges, diarrhoea treatment (Imodium), painkillers, plasters (band-aids), insect repellent, and re-hydration salts (Dioralite).
- Camera
- Travel clothes
- Swimwear (optional)
- Pocket knife and repair kit (optional)

Cotswold Outdoor



Many of the Equipment items listed above are available from <u>Cotswold Outdoor</u> - our *'Official Recommended Outdoor Retailer'*. When you book a holiday with KE you will receive 12.5% discount voucher from Cotswold Outdoor and other retailers.

>> Find out more

Land Only Information

The LAND ONLY dates and prices are for the itinerary starting at the hotel in Delhi. A single group transfer is provided from Delhi Airport on Day 1 of the Land Only itinerary and back to the airport on the final day of the Land Only itinerary.

Flight Inclusive Information

The FLIGHT INCLUSIVE dates and prices are based on UK flights from London to Delhi. Outbound flights will usually depart from the UK in the evening, arriving in Delhi in the morning on the following day (Day 1 of the Land Only itinerary). Return flights will depart Delhi on the last day of the itinerary, arriving in the UK later the same day.

Please Note This document was downloaded on 15/05/2024 and the trip is subject to change