

Kolkata (22°34'11"N, 88°22'11"E), formerly known as Calcutta, is regarded as the cultural capital of India. Historically, it was the capital of British India from 1773 to 1911. Therafter, it became the capital of undivided Bengal until the 1947 Partition of Bengal, after which it has remained to be the capital of West Bengal. It is a major metropolitan city, known for being the melting pot of several cultures, embracing, with graceful ease, the new without endangering the old. This riverside city of culture, heritage, spirituality, music, literature, arts and architectural wonders offers an amalgamation of various types of tourist spots, all affirming its respect and love for its rich cultural heritage.

Memorials and museums:

An iconic tourist attraction is the Kolkata Maidan, also referred to as the "lungs of Kolkata", which houses the Victoria Memorial, the Eden Gardens (the 100,000 seater cricket amphitheatre), Fort William (the Eastern zone high command of the Indian Army) and Shaheed Minar ("Tower of the Martyrs"). Of these, special mention should be made of Victoria Memorial, which is dedicated to Queen Victoria, the nineteenth-century monarch of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and also Empress of British India. The Indo-Saracenic style marble structure is modelled on the Taj Mahal, Agra. It not only houses paintings of the British Royal family, the Mughal School and the Company school, but also historical artefacts like the throne of the Nawab of Bengal and several lithographs and documents of historical interest. Its architecture as well as the invitingly sprawling lawns make it a major tourist attraction.

Victoria Memorial

A splendid architectural structure in white marble, modeled on the Taj Mahal, was built in the early 20th century. In memory of Queen Victoria and was formally inaugurated by the Prince of Wales in 1921 who later became King Edward VIII of England. The stately bronze statue of the queen near the entrance, the brass canons, wrought iron street lamps, manicured lawns, gardens and pathways, the magical lighting effect in the evening and a fairy tale 'Fountain of Joy' facing the memorial building create an atmosphere of unforgettable charm.

Jorasanko Thakur Bari (also called Tagore Museum)

just off Rabindra Sarani, north of BBD Bag, is the ancestral home of the Tagore family . For almost a century, the sprawling mansions were the cultural hub of Kolkata: a major force in the

women's liberation movement and an important centre during the Independence movement. The museum displays the life and works of Tagore and the historical facts about the Bengal Renaissance. The daily sound-and-light show, in Bengali, at 6 and 7 pm is a must-watch.

The Indian Museum

The largest museum in Asia, has an immensely valuable and comprehensive collection of specimens of Indian natural history and Indian Art. The Meteorite hall and Dinosaur hall in the Natural History and Geology section are must-visits, as are the numismatics section and the collections of Gandhara Art, Burmese woodwork and Mughal miniatures in the Indian Art section.

Birla Industrial & Technological Museum

The first popular science museum in Asia, has an immensely significant collection of interactive popular science exhibits of gadgets and machinery of the late 19C and early 20C.

The Birla Planetarium

Another landmark of the city, is the largest planetarium in south-east Asia and one of the biggest in the world. It regularly runs, in English, Hindi and Bengali, the educational show which introduces the spectators to various celestial bodies.

Eden Garden

In the North-West corner of the Maidan are small & pleasantly laid out Eden Gardens. The gardens were created in 1840 and named after the sister of Lord Auckland, the former governor general. The idea was to make a Biblical - style garden of Eden in India. The expanse dotted with beautiful trees and shrubs is intersected by winding paths, and there is a large artificial lake. Alongside the gardens, is the world famous Eden Gardens cricket stadium. The stadium is supposed to be the largest in Asia with a seating capacity of more than a lakh spectators. The Kolkata cricket ground, where International test & one day matches are held, is also with in the gardens. Near the gardens one can take a pleasant walk along the bank of Hooghly river.

Maidan & Fort William

The area cleared around Fort William is called the Maidan, the 'lungs' of modern Kolkata. This huge green expanse stretches three km north to south and is over a km wide. It is bound by Strand Rd along the river to the west and by Chowringhee Rd, lined with shops, offices, hotels and delicious eateries, to the east. The stream known as Tolly's Nullah forms its southern boundary, and here you will find a racecourse and the Victoria Memorial. In the north-west corner of the Maidan is Eden Gardens, while Raj Bhavan overlooks it from the north.

Ochterlony Monument

The enchanting Saheed Minar of Kolkata is made on similar lines of famous Qutub Minar of Delhi and forms an important landmark of Kolkata. Popularly known as the Ochterlony Monument, the minar was built in 1848 by Sir David Ochterlony to commemorate his victory in the Nepal War (1814-1816).

The construction of the monument encompasses an architectural variety. The foundation followed an Egyptian style whereas the body of the Minar and the dome resembled Syrian and Turkish designs respectively. The Minar is 158 ft. High with two balconies at the top. One can reach the balcony by using the serpentine staircase. 198 stairs lead from the bottom to the first balcony. From here 25 more stairs lead to the second balcony.

It was named Sahid Minar in 1969 in the memory of the brave patriots who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of India. The custom of convening political seminars started in 1931 when a historical convocation took place here which was presided by Rabindranath Tagore. The humanitarian poet had severely condemned the vandalism of the imperialist British Government during the independence movement.

Bridges

Howrah Bridge (Rabindra Setu) and the **Second Hooghly Bridge (Vidyasagar Setu)** are iconic structures which silhouette the cityscape. This can be ascertained by the Strand Road riverside walk past the "ghats" or piers.

Gardens and Parks

The Indian **Botanical Garden**, the oldest "botanics" in India, houses 50,000 species of the flora world. The major tourist attraction is the 250 year old, 98 feet tall banyan tree, arguably the banyan tree with the largest girth ever recorded (1300 ft). The sprawling expanse of the herbarium makes it a popular picnic spot. Another major tourist picnic spot is the **Alipore**

Zoological Gardens which is home to innumerable species of the fauna world. Apart from the zoo, the major amusement parks are **Eco Park, Nicco Park, Aquatica, Science City** and **Millennium Park**.

Malls

World-class shopping experience awaits the urban shopper in malls like **Forum Mall, City Centre (1 and 2), South City Mall** and **Mani Square Mall, Quest Mall** to name only a few. For believers in the old way of shopping, **New Market (Hogg Market)** is the answer.

Places of worship

The famous **Kalighat Kali Temple**, dedicated to the goddess Kali, is one of the 51 Shakti 'Peethas'. It is a famous pilgrimage site for Hindu 'Shakta' (Shiva and Durga/Kali/Shakti worshippers) followers.

Another greatly revered temple is, **Dakshineswar Temple**, which is dedicated to Goddess Kali. It lies on the bank of the Ganges, north of Belur Math. Ramakrishna Paramhansa, a devout worshipper of the goddess is associated with this temple, as the temple site is believed to have been his place of meditation.

Belur Math on the western bank of the Hooghly, in the Howrah district, was founded by Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, and epitomises the disciple's love for his guru. The Math is easily accessible since it is well connected by bus and train routes. The Math houses a prayer hall, a monastery, several temples as well as the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission. The architectural design of the Math, a blend of the structures of temples, churches and mosques, bears out Ramakrishna Paramhansa's belief in the principle of religious fraternity.

Calcutta Jain Temple (also called Parasnath Temple) a Jain temple at Badridas Temple Street is a major tourist attraction in Kolkata (Calcutta), India.. The entire temple and outside campus is beautifully decorated with Belgian glass. The throne of the main Deity Shree Sheetalnath, the tenth Tirthankara is decorated with real gemstones and silver. There are other idols made of Emerald, ruby and other precious gemstones in the temple.

The **Tipu Sultan Shahi Mosque** is a famous mosque in Kolkata, India. Located at 185 Dhartamtalla Street, the mosque is a relic of architectural and cultural heritage. People from all sections of society and religions are allowed to visit and take pictures of this historical premise. The Mosque was built in 1832 by Prince Ghulam Mohammed, the youngest son of Tipu Sultan.

Nakhoda Mosque is located in Jacquaria Street, near the junction of Chitpore Road and Mahatma Gandhi Road in Kolkata. Nakhoda Mosque of Kolkata in the beginning was a small mosque. It was as late in 1926, when resident of Kutch, Abdar Rahim Osman built the present structure. Nakhoda Mosque of Kolkata is the biggest of its kind in Kolkata. It was constructed following the style of Akbar's tomb at Sikandra- which is a piece of Indo-Saracenic architecture.

St. Paul's Cathedral, the first Episcopal Church of the Orient, is located on the Maidan. The magnificent structure is a specimen of superlative Indo-Gothic architecture. The main hall of the cathedral is very large and contains splendidly-carved wooden pews. Its eastern walls are covered with breathtaking artwork. In recent times, a meditation point has been set up in collaboration with the distinguished citizens of Shantiniketan. It is no wonder that the architecture and ambience of the Cathedral provides a spiritually as well as aesthetically rewarding experience.

Not only the city but also the neighbouring areas are equally picturesque and steeped in culture:

Shantiniketan

180 kilometres north of Kolkata lies the town of Shantiniketan (Birbhum district), popularised by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, whose vision now stands in the form of Visva-Bharati University. The town formerly called Bhubandanga (named after Bhuban Dakat, a local dacoit) was rightly renamed Shantiniketan, [abode (niketan) of peace (shanti)] by Rabindranath's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. Apart from being the setting for many of Tagore's literary classics, it has cultural and historical value since Tagore's house stands there even today. Numerous social and cultural events take place throughout the year: Basanta Utsav, Barsha Mangal, Sharodotsav, Nandan Mela, Poush Mela, Magh Mela and Rabindra Jayanti. Of these, special mention should be made of Poush Mela, a three-day fair, starting on the 7th day of the Bengali month, Poush, which roughly corresponds to the last week of December. It not only attracts tourists but also artisans, dancers, and traditional Baul singers, making it the optimum place for having a taste of the real flavour of Bengali culture.

Darjeeling

For the lover of snowy peaks, only twelve hours away, lies the breathtakingly beautiful hill station, Darjeeling, a tourist hotspot. The former British sanatorium, located in the Lesser Himalayas at an average elevation of 6,710 ft (2,050 m), can be reached easily by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway from New Jalpaiguri or by National Highway 55, from Siliguri, 77 km away. The nearest airport is in Bagdogra, located 90 kms from the hill station. Darjeeling is internationally renowned for its tea industry and also the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) which has one of the few steam locomotives still in service in India. Among several interesting tourist activities, watching sunrise atop the Tiger Hill is an experience that defies description. A must-visit is The Lloyd's Botanical Garden which houses rare species of plants, including a wide variety of orchids. Another place of immense interest is The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park which specialises in conserving and breeding endangered Himalayan species. The nearby Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary shelters animals like the one-horned rhinoceros, elephant, tiger, leopard and hog deer, while the bird species include the Bengal florican and herons.

The Sundarbans

The Sundarbans (named after the Sundari trees found here) is the largest single block of tidal halophytic mangrove forest in the world. It lies in the delta on the Bay of Bengal formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. Inscribed as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1997, the forest forms the largest Tiger Reserve and National Park in India. Since the Sundarbans is an important wintering area for migrant water birds, the avifauna found here includes such rarities as the Masked Finfoot, Mangrove Pitta and the Mangrove Whistler, making it a birdwatcher's paradise. The area is known for the Royal Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*), as well as numerous fauna including species of spotted (Chital) deer, rhesus monkey, crocodiles and snakes. The Barking Deer is found only on Holiday Island, while, the endangered river Terrapin, Batagur baska is found on the Mechua Beach. Surely, the Sundarbans, which has been enlisted amongst the finalist in the New Seven Wonders of Nature, offers a touring experience of which has an extraordinary allure of its own.

In a nutshell, the passion for enjoying life's best is reflected in the festive spirit of the city, borne out by the saying "Baro mashe, tero parbon" -12 months, 13 festivals. The

community puja is one of the most spectacular events in Kolkata. The main festivals are Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja and Saraswati Puja, Dol Purnima, Nabobarsho, Christmas, Bakr-id and Id-ul-fitr. Bengali fish items like bhapa Ilish, malai chingri, pabda maach and Bengali sweets like rosogolla, rosomolai and mishti doi, the major attractions on the culinary landscape, affirm the average Calcuttan's passion for good food. It is the city that drinks "life to the lees" and casts a spell of intoxicating charm whether it be that of Park Street, the foremost dining district in Kolkata, with restaurants and eateries like Shiraz, Flury's, Trinca's and Peter Cat or the laid-back mesmerizing kind of old world charm of College Street, a book lover's paradise, with thousands of books comprising the landscape, and of course, the historical institution, the India Coffee House. In this miracle of a city, contrasting lifestyles and philosophies thrive in a manner which would leave a traveller wondering in amazement at his encounter with the phenomenon called "Kolkata"...Welcome to the experience!