

India Decoded

You've definitely heard all the clichés about India. A mystical, magical land of snake charmers, spicy food, and call centers. That is mostly true (except for the snake charmers bit – you might have to watch a movie for that). It is a beautiful and vast country, worth exploring a little bit if you have the time (look at the Travel Info section for help with arranging trips).

This land of great diversity is also a land of great disparity. Indians are getting richer on the whole but not quite at the pace needed. So expect to see signs of poverty when you are here (half of Mumbai lives in slums, many of which are strong economic engines). Religion is also big (and in your face) here. Cleanliness is a relative term. With that in mind, here are some pointers to make your trip easier:

- Language is generally not a problem in India. English is the language of business and most people speak it to some extent (you are on your own with the various accents though!)
- Cash is king in India so make sure you carry enough. ATMs are fairly common if you need to withdraw cash. Credit cards are now accepted in most places but it helps to have cash as a backup. The small stores that make up the bulk of retail in India will not accept credit cards
- If you are using your American credit card, remember that most credit card companies in the U.S. charge a 3% foreign transaction fee
- Since you will be carrying cash, be sure to keep an eye on your purse/wallet. Don't take a chance by leaving your stuff unattended
- Drink bottled water - better safe than sorry
- Don't forget to start on your malaria pills before you travel
- It is not unusual to see adults and children begging at traffic lights or tourist places. Please do not give in to their pleas and stories. Begging (admittedly, not all of it) is an organized industry where people sometimes 'hire' children for the day to tug at people's heart strings. Some have quotas for the day assigned by the powers that run these rings
- Since religion is so big, you will find places of worship big and small all over the place. We want to especially mention the significance of the symbol of swastika. It is an ancient symbol of auspiciousness in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (its origin can be traced to the Indus Valley Civilization that existed in India from 3300–1300 BCE). It is widely used so expect to see it everywhere. Its usage long predates the Nazi hijacking of the symbol and will continue to be used for a long time in the future. We want to sensitize our Jewish friends to this so they don't find it offensive. The connection of the swastika with the Nazis is weak to non-existent in India