



## **Tour Guide West Bengal, India**

Situated in the east of India, West Bengal stretches from the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. This state shares international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. Compared to other Indian states, few travelers visit West Bengal.

### **Kolkata**

Kolkata, formerly Calcutta, is the capital of West Bengal, and is the largest city with a population of 14 million. The urban poverty stereotypically associated with Kolkata can overwhelm visitors. We do not recommend visiting and touring Kolkata. Traveling within the city is very challenging and can be and frustrating.

If you are inclined (and are traveling with a companion), some interesting things to do in Kolkata are: visit the Botanical Gardens and see the Great Banyan Tree; go to the Birla Planetarium, one of the largest planetariums in the world, visit College Street and look at the sidewalk bookshops (perhaps the world's largest outdoor book market); go to the Albert Street coffee house at Calcutta University; watch a cricket match at Eden Gardens; or visit the Marble Palace, one of the most eccentric art museums in the world.

### **South of Kolkata: Sunderbans**

Located 131 kilometers south of Kolkata, Sunderbans is the world's largest delta and mangrove swamp. Sunderbans is formed by the merging of three rivers - the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna - and has a 2,585 square kilometer wildlife sanctuary that extends into Bangladesh. The Wildlife Sanctuary, which is the world's largest estuarine sanctuary, has some of India's most interesting wildlife, and is worth a visit.

Sunderbans is home to spotted deer, wild pigs, monkeys, herons, kingfishers, white bellied eagles, and almost 270 Royal Bengal tigers. Sunderbans' other creatures include estuarine terrapins, Olive Ridley turtles, estuarine crocodiles, Ganges dolphins, water monitors and a wide variety of birds, fish and crustaceans. Also part of Sunderbans is the Sajnekhali Bird Sanctuary. Besides a heronry, the Sajnekhali Visitors' Centre has a crocodile enclosure, a shark pond, a turtle hatchery, and a Mangrove Interpretation Centre.

The West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation organizes guided tours, which are typically two or three days long, starting and ending at Kolkata. These are a good way of visiting Sunderbans and cost between Rs 1,000 and 3,000. Within Sunderbans, the only way to get around is by boat; you can take a boat ride, along with an official from the Project Tiger office. There are, in addition, watchtowers at a few places - such as Netidhopan, Sajnekhali, Sudhanyakhali and Haldi - from where you can keep a look out for passing wildlife.

## Central Bengal

Central Bengal is a low-lying, quiet rural region with few tourist attractions. Places of interest include:

- Murshidabad is famous for its historical interest. It was the capital of Bengal during Nawab Siraj-ud-dulla and has many palaces and mosques. It is also famous for handloom silks and handicrafts.
- Bishnupur is a sleepy backwater town famous for its terracotta temples, and as an historical centre of Bengali learning.
- Shantiniketan is the home of Visvabharati University. There is also a deer and bird sanctuary nearby.

## North Bengal

The magnificent mountain panoramas of the Himalayas can be seen from North Bengal. The most popular tourist destinations in North Bengal include:

- Darjeeling, located in the northern extreme of the state, is just east of Nepal, south of Sikkim, and a bit west and south of Bhutan. Darjeeling is the legendary British hill station perched in the foothills of the Himalayas. It is most famous for its once magnificent tea estates. Despite a steady and inexorable decline since independence, roughly a half-century ago, these estates still produce a substantial portion of the world's tea. For rail enthusiasts, however, Darjeeling is better known for its "Toy Train." This famous narrow gauge steam railway plies its way from Siliguri in the plains below up to Ghoom and Darjeeling in the hills.
- Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, established in 1943, helps protect wildlife against encroachment of tea cultivation. Comprised of tracts of tall elephant grass on the banks of the River Torsa, the sanctuary is home to about fifty highly endangered one-horned rhinoceroses, wild elephants, sambar, and hog deer. The sanctuary is open from October until the end of April.