

VARANASI

Day 1

Devote your first day in Varanasi to the city's essential sights. Start with an early-morning boat ride on the Ganges River, which reveals Hindu pilgrims performing sunrise prayers and rituals. After your boat ride, take an early-morning tour of old Varanasi with a local guide, during which you'll learn the history of Dasaswamedh Ghat and Talang Swami Ashram. Spend the afternoon visiting some of the city's holiest spots, which include Golden Temple (Kashi Vishwanath); it's believed that those who make a pilgrimage here gain liberation from the karmic cycle of death and rebirth. In the evening, head down to Dashashwamedh Ghat to watch the evening Aarti, an atmospheric ceremony during which priests make offerings to the Ganges River.

Day 2

Dedicate your second day to exploring the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sarnath, one of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India, on a half-day tour. Visit the Dhamek Stupa, where the Buddha is reputed to have given his first sermon after attaining enlightenment, and the Sarnath Archeological Museum, which houses almost 7,000 Buddhist artifacts. In the afternoon, head out on a tour of Varanasi's rural villages; most tours stop at the town of Sarai Mohana, a great place to shop for silk saris, and Chirgaon, where visitors can learn about rural life. Top off your day of exploration with a cooking class and dinner in a local home before turning in for the night.

Day 3

Spend your final day in Prayagraj, a 3-hour drive from Varanasi. Formerly known as Allahabad, Prayagraj is the second-oldest inhabited city in India and an important pilgrimage site; it's also one of four destinations for Kumbh Mela, the largest spiritual gathering in the world. Start your day with a visit to the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and Saraswati Rivers, before heading to the Allahabad Fort, a 16th-century Mughal Fort with great riverside views