5.**Mahabodhi Temple**

The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which lies about 115 km south of Patna, the capital of Bihar, and 16 km from the district headquarters of Gaya. The magnificent Mahabodhi Temple is one of the four holy sites related to the life of Lord Buddha, and marks the spot where he attained enlightenment. Standing in the middle of Bodh Gaya town, set amid lush green lawns, the iconic sandstone temple rises to a height of about 52 m. With intricate engravings and arch motifs on its shikhara (tower), it is a spectacular sight. Inside the temple, a gilded statue showcases Lord Buddha in his famous bhumisparsha mudra, with one finger touching the earth, asking it to witness his enlightenment. A chamber at the top houses a statue of Mayadevi, Lord Buddha’s mother. The Mahabodhi Temple, destroyed in the 12th century was resurrected in the 14th century and excavated in 1811. It is truly a sight to behold. A pond near the temple that houses blooming lotus flowers is a particular attraction.

**4.Golden Temple**

Amritsar is world-famous for the beautiful and highly revered Golden Temple or Sri Harmandir Sahib, which is one of the most prominent spiritual sites in the country. The temple is a two-storeyed structure with its top half covered in almost 400 kg of pure gold leaf, which is what earned it its English moniker. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the leader of the Sikh empire, is believed to have initiated the construction in the 19th century. The rest of the temple complex is built in white marble, inlaid with precious and semi-precious colourful stones. To create motifs, the pietra dura technique has been used. The grand temple complex is awe-inspiring in its size.

One must cover one’s head and remove his/her footwear before entering the Golden Temple, as a mark of respect. As one listens to the beautiful notes of gurbani (spiritual songs), the serene spirituality of the temple soothes the soul. One can also partake of the free meal that is offered here to around 20,000 people every day at the Guru Ka Langar (community meal), regardless of caste, creed or gender. The entire process is managed by volunteers and is one of the most humbling experiences you can have.

The architecture of the temple is spectacular and a 67 ft square of marble makes up the base of the structure. The glistening temple is surrounded by Amrit Sarovar (pool of nectar), whose waters are said to have healing powers. One can also watch colourful fish swim in the lake’s clear blue waters as devotees take a dip in it. The temple has been designed keeping in mind the basic tenets of Sikhism that advocate universal brotherhood and all-inclusive ethos. Thus, it is accessible from all directions.

The main entrance boasts an imposing clock tower, which also has a Central Sikh Museum. From here, one can sight spectacular views of the shrine and its elegant silhouette in the Amrit Sarovar.  A second entry is through the silver doors of the gorgeously embellished Darshani Deori, which leads onto the causeway that links the sanctum sanctorum with the Parikrama, the marbled surface surrounding the sarovar.

In the north-west corner of the complex is the Jubi tree, which is believed to possess special powers. It is said to have been planted 450 years ago by the Golden Temple’s first high priest, Baba Buddha.

During the day, the holy book of the Sikhs – the Granth Sahib – is kept inside the temple. At night, it is taken to the Akal Takth or Eternal Throne, that houses ancient weaponry earlier used by Sikh warriors. There are other famous temples surrounding Sri Harmandir Sahib, including the Durgiana Temple as well as a beautiful garden and the tower of Baba Atal. It is said that sage Valmiki wrote the epic Ramayana in this sacred place.

**1.Ajmer-E-Sharif**

Standing at the heart of a bustling street, Ajmer-e-Sharif is one of the most sanctified Sufi shrines in the country. Dargah Sharif or Ajmer-e-Sharif invites devotees from across the globe, who come to pay homage to Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. He was known for his secular ideologies and noble teachings pertaining to peace. The street outside the Dargah is lined with shops selling a wide range of articles like perfumes, sweets, flowers and 'chadars' or cloth, which are offered to Khwaja. As one enters the Dargah, one needs to go through a series of massive doors made of silver with striking carvings. They open into a courtyard that houses the tomb of Moinuddin Chishti, carved out of marble. The Dargah has a gold plating on top and is guarded by a railing made of silver and a marble screen. The evening rituals include Mehfil-e-Sama, which is an enthralling experience for visitors. Don't miss the massive cooking utensil called badi deg while you are leaving the Dargah compound. It is believed that throwing money in the vessel will make all your wishes come true.

**6.Mount Abu**

About three hours away from Udaipur is Rajasthan’s only hill station, Mount Abu, which rests 1,722 m above the sea level in the panoramic Aravalli range. One can reach here within three hours from Udaipur to enjoy the lake, waterfalls and exquisite Jain temples. At the heart of this popular tourists destination is the tranquil Nakki Lake. Legends say that the lake was dug by gods using nakh or nails; thus it's name. The lake is surrounded by green hills, well-laid-out parks and unique rock formations, including the Toad Rock, which resembles a toad about to hop into the water! The 14th-century Raghunath Temple stands near the lake’s southern shore. Boating is one of the most popular tourist activities at the lake. Also popular is the sunset point on the hill, from where one can enjoy brilliant views of the setting sun.

The town is surrounded by the 289-sq-km Mt Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, which extends over most of the mountains. The place is also home to one of the finest Jain temples in the world, the Delwara temples. Built over several decades, these marble temples were constructed many centuries before the town was setup. Two of the temples are so intricately carved, they seem like have been constructed by divine hands. The first and the older one is Vimal Vasahi, on which work began in 1031, taking over 14 years to be completed. It is dedicated to the first tirthankar (Jain teacher), Adinath. The Luna Vasahi temple is dedicated to 22nd tirthankar Neminath and was built in 1230 and is said to have taken 15 years to be completed. In this temple, the marble has been so finely carved that at places it seems the stone has become transparent, letting light pass through!

Mount Abu also boasts the highest point of the entire Aravalli range called the Guru Shikhar, on which is located a temple dedicated to Dattatreya, who is considered to be the son gifted to sage Atri and his wife Anasuya by the Divine Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Mount Abu is not only important in terms of its scenic locations but also in terms of religious values and architectural heritage.

**2.Balaji**

Among the most popular global pilgrimage places, Tirupati, in Andhra Pradesh, is a stopover for those seeking spirituality and sanctity. Situated at the foot of Tirumala Hills, this lively pilgrim place attracts devotees all year round. Tirupati Balaji or the Lord Venkatesha Temple is the main attraction here. Said to be one of the richest temples in the country, it sees an estimated footfall of 60,000 every day. Devotees donate their hair and various riches in the temple in order to please the god.

Though the temple is an overwhelming presence in the town, Tirupati also houses one of the oldest and the rarest geological formations in the world – a natural stone arch. Lying in close proximity to the temple, the stone arch or Sila Thoranam (garland or festoon of rocks) has been categorised as Precambrian and is believed to be 1,500 million years old! Tirupati has been ruled by various kingdoms such as the Pallavas around the 9th century, Cholas in the 10th century, and Vijayanagara between the 14th and 15th centuries. It is believed that the rituals in this temple town were formulated by Shri Ramanujacharya, a Hindu theologian and philosopher, in the 11th century.

The Tirumala Hills, which is a group of seven hills namely, Seshadri, Vedadri, Garudadri, Anjanadri, Vrishabadri, Narayanadri and Venkatadri, add to the beauty of the town. When viewed from the top, these hills appear to be in the form of a coiled serpent. It is believed that they were once the resting place of Lord Vishnu.

One of the richest temples in the country and a major tourist spot in South India, Lord Venkatesha Temple is popularly recognised as Tirupati Balaji. The temple is dedicated to Lord Venkateshwara, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and its sacred shrine has been mentioned in holy scriptures such as the Garuda Purana, Brahma Purana and many others. The temple is situated at a height of 853 m above sea level and is positioned on Venkata Hill, which is one of the saptagiri (seven hills) of Tirumala Hills. These seven peaks are said to be the hoods of sheshnag (serpent god). The awe-inspiring sacred shrine of the temple is covered in pure gold and is a sight to behold.

The temple is flooded with devotees all year round and the average time taken for a devotee to reach the main idol can range from three to five hours. However, one can book online tickets to avoid the long queues and visit the main shrine devoid of hassles. The temple follows the rituals prescribed by Saint Ramanujacharya in the 11th century. Prayers start at 3 am and end with Ekanta Seva (a ritual in which a priest sings lullabies to put the lord to sleep) at 1 am. A popular practice in the temple is the donation of hair and various riches in order to please the god. The architecture of the temple building is spectacular and reflects the Dravidian style. Three entrances lead to the sanctum sanctorum - the first is called Mahadwaram. A gopuram (gateway), measuring 50 ft, is placed in front of the entrance. There are two circumambulation (parikrama) paths. While the first one comprises many-pillared halls and flagstaffs, the second has many sub-shrines and other edifices along with the main kitchen. The main shrine houses a gold-plated tower that is called Ananda Nilayam, and a temple inside the tower houses the main deity. Devotees also visit a holy pond located on the northern side of the temple.

**3.Basilica of Bom Jesus**

Probably the most famous church in Goa and one of the most revered by Christians globally, the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Old Goa is famed for housing the mortal remains of St Francis Xavier. This complex, along with some other churches of Old Goa, features on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Its exterior facade, built using black granite, is noted for Baroque architecture combined with Doric, Corinthian and composite influences.

Inside, the main altar is 30-ft-broad and 54-ft-high and its pillars have been erected using basalt from Bassein (now Vasai, a town in Maharashtra), approximately 300 km away. Richly gilded, it features the figure of infant Jesus Christ, above which is a statue of St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order. The latter gazes at a medallion, and above this is depicted the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and the Holy Spirit). The southern side of the basilica houses the chapel wherein are preserved the sacred relics St Francis Xavier. The church's interior is richly adorned with wood carvings and paintings that depict scenes from the lives of St Xavier. A silver casket, which contains the sacred relics of the saint, is divided into seven panels each of which contains two plates that are representative of the incidents of the saint's life.

The Basilica of Bom Jesus is the only church in the state to not have plastered exterior. On November 24, 1594, the foundation stone of the church was laid and it was consecrated on May 15, 1605 by the Archbishop of Goa, Fr Alexia de Menezes. It was raised to the status of basilica in 1946.