Varanasi, popularly known as the City of Lights or Kashi, is a sacred city on the west bank of the River Ganga. It is said to be one of the oldest cities in India whose history goes back over 3000 years. [Varanasi](https://www.tourmyindia.com/states/uttarpradesh/varanasi.html) has remained a significant religious destination for pilgrims in India, and for international travelers, it reflects the culture and historical prosperity of India. Today, Varanasi is a bustling city, where every winding street leads to another, ghats are constantly packed, and the scent of incense is noticeable all around. The aartis and the skimming of earthen lights over the waters of Ganga at night is also a significant component of the character of Varanasi.

**Top Reasons to Visit Varanasi**

* To witness the Ganga aarti. This mesmerizing event can be experienced in a boat on the river.
* To visit temples that are as old as 500-1000 years.
* To shop for famous Banarasi sarees, exquisite woodwork, and hand-knotted carpets.
* Banarasi paan is very popular in the country and must be savored during the trip.
* To visit Sarnath located about 10 km from Varanasi. It is the place where Gautama Buddha first preached after attaining enlightenment.

Want to experience the spirituality of India at its most vibrant? Head to Varanasi in **Uttar Pradesh**. This ancient city, inhabited continuously for some 2,800 years (and counting), is one of the holiest places for Hindus. Devotees believe Varanasi is where they can break free from the cycle of rebirth and unite with the divine upon death. The conviction manifests in a profound intensity that pulses throughout the frenetic city.

The center of action in Varanasi can be found at the **Banaras ghats** — a series of giant steps leading to the **Ganges River**. In the morning, the devout descend the stairs to wash away their sins in the holy water, and at night, they return for fire-fueled prayer ceremonies.

The energy continues throughout the day in the **labyrinthine old city**. Legend has it that no accurate map has ever been drawn of Varanasi's complex web of twisting alleys. Expect to get lost and experience some of the best sightseeing of your life.

Want to make the most of your time in **"The City of Light"**? Check out our list of the best places to visit in Varanasi.

1.Ganges River

Named after the Hindu goddess Ganga, the Ganges River is one of the most revered natural sites in India. The river extends southeast from the **Himalayas** in the north to the **Bay of Bengal**. Between 400 million and 600 million people rely on the Ganges River to provide water for daily bathing and drinking.

Hindus come to Varanasi from all around the world to purify themselves in the holy Ganges water and perform rituals along the dozens of **ghats**along the river. For tourists, the river helps provide a fixed point of orientation for navigating around the city, and you'll no doubt spend lots of time sightseeing and watching life happen around the Ganges.

Consider waking up early and taking a sunrise cruise along the river — negotiate with one of the countless boatman hanging out along the ghats.

In the afternoon or early evening, one of the top things to do in Varanasi is purchase a small **floating offering filled with fresh flowers and a candle**, and release it onto the Ganges River. The blissful experience will connect you more deeply with Hindu culture and stay in your mind for years to come.

2.Dasaswamedh ghat

The lively atmosphere of the Dasaswamedh Ghat makes it one of the best places to visit in Varanasi. This tourist attraction is a swirling hodgepodge of flower sellers touting bright blossoms, boat operators hawking rides along the **Ganges River,**and **sadhus** (holy men) with face paint. You can spend hours people watching in this area during the day.

Hindu priests put on the **Ganga Aarti**every night at the Dasaswamedh Ghat, starting at around 7pm. Donning saffron-hued robes, the priests spread out plates of flower petals and other offerings and blow a conch shell to signal the start of the spiritual ceremony. Thousands of tourists gather to watch the priests chant and wave tiered plates of sandalwood-scented incense in intricate patterns for about 45 minutes. It's an extravagant sight that you won't want to miss.

**Hot tip:**Get to the ghat at least a couple of hours early if you want to beat the crowds and score a great spot for the show. You can also get incredible views from boats along the river or in shop balconies above the ghat.

3.Assi Ghat

When it comes to famous places in Varanasi, the city's southernmost main ghat regularly tops the list. Assi Ghat's star attraction is a **Shiva lingam** (phallic representation of the Hindu deity) beneath a **sacred fig tree.**It draws hundreds of pilgrims every day, who come to worship Lord Shiva after rinsing in the Ganges River.

Feeling a little stiff from traveling? Swing by Assi Ghat at sunrise, when you can get your downward-facing dog on with dozens of others during **morning yoga**accompanied by live music every day. Tourists can also see another **Ganga Aarti**performance here in the evening, which is slightly smaller and more intimate than the one at **Dasaswamedh Ghat**.

4.Manikarnika Ghat

Plumes of smoke swirl toward the sky at Manikarnika Ghat. No, it's not from a factory — it's from the perpetual cremations that happen on this ghat. Hindus believe that Manikarnika Ghat is one of the most auspicious places for the departed to reach moksha (emancipation from the cycle of spiritual rebirth). The funeral pyre at this ghat burns 24/7, and around 100 cremations take place every day.

Priests or guides frequently offer to lead tourists through the fascinating ghat, however some can be aggressive in their demands for money. You may see **doms**(members of an untouchable caste) carrying cloth-wrapped bodies on makeshift stretchers, along with piles of firewood stacked up, ready to feed the pyre.

You may also be offered the chance to **see a cremation up close** — for a fee, of course. While profound, the experience is not for the faint of heart, nor is it a tourist attraction in the traditional sense. Know your limits, be respectful, and avoid taking photos of the funerals, mourners, and the departed.

**Hot tip:**If you're interested in the ritualistic cremations, but can't stomach the idea of seeing them up close, consider passing by Manikarnika Ghat on a **boat tour**along the **Ganges River**. The distance dampens the effect while still giving tourists a sense of what's happening in this important place.

6.Dhamek Stupa

Hinduism certainly has a stronghold on Varanasi, but Buddhism has a major presence less than 12 kilometers away in the village of **Sarnath**. Here, you'll find the Dhamek Stupa, a massive stone and brick structure that's 43.6 meters tall and 28 meters in diameter. The stupa was built more than 1,500 years ago as a replacement for a structure that dated back to 249 BCE.

The devout believe that the Buddha came to Dhamek Stupa to give his first sermon, which revealed the **Eightfold Path**, after he achieved enlightenment. Take a look at the elegant carvings of birds, people, and flowers that cover the walls of the stupa as you wander around the attraction.

Sarnath also has plenty of other tourist places that make it a worthwhile day trip destination from Varanasi. Check out the **Chaukhandi Stupa**(a Buddhist shrine that dates back to at least the 6th century), then make your way to the **Sarnath Museum**to see the **Lion Capital of Ashoka**, a sculpture that used to sit atop the **Ashoka Pillar**in 250 BCE and became the official **Emblem of India** in 1950. Round out the day with sightseeing at the peaceful **Tibetan Temple** before making your way back to Varanasi.

7.Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple

Hindu pilgrims and tourists alike travel for thousands of miles to reach the Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple, a sacred attraction around four kilometers from the **Varanasi Junction railway station** near the **Manikarnika Ghat**. The impressive structure, dedicated to the Hindu deity Shiva, has earned the nickname **"The Golden Temple"**for its striking spire — plated in some 800 kilograms of pure gold. The distinctive design of this temple has gone on to inspire the architecture of hundreds of other temples across India.

Strict security measures around the complex require that tourists stash their cameras, phones, bags, and other belongings in a rentable locker nearby. Expect to ditch your shoes and wait in line with hundreds of other visitors, all eager to touch the 60-centimeter-tall, sin-absolving **Shiva lingam**in a **silver alter**. It's an intense, yet rewarding experience

**Hot tip:**Skip this attraction on Hindu holidays, when devotees wait in line for up to two full days to enter the temple.

8.Banaras Hindu University

Banaras Hindu University has been a central part of Varanasi's identity since its inception in 1916. The well-respected public university is home to more than 25,000 students, making it one of Asia's largest residential universities.

There are no hill stations near Varanasi, so if you're looking for an escape from the crowds and busy city, come to this lush 1,300-acre campus. The serene area is shaded by hundreds of tall trees and offers a breath of fresh air from the hectic atmosphere at the **Banaras Ghats.**

While on campus, swing by the **New Vishwanath Temple,**a famous temple that finally finished its decades-long construction in 1966. Standing 77 meters high, the temple is one of the tallest in India and draws architectural inspiration from the nearby Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple.

Visitors to the university should also make a point to explore the on-campus museum, **Bharat Kala Bhavan**. The cultural institution features a spectacular **collection of miniature paintings**, along with over 100,000 other artifacts of archeological and artistic importance.

9.Ramnagar Fort

There are few destinations in India without a fort, and Varanasi is no exception. About 14 kilometers from the city center, you'll find Ramnagar Fort. The 18th-century sandstone fort and palace is no longer used as a defensive structure, but instead houses a **quirky museum** brimming with vintage automobiles, elaborate hookahs, antique weapons, sedan chairs decked out in jewels, and a one-of-a-kind astronomical clock that's more than 150 years old.

After enjoying an archeological treasure hunt at the museum, check out the fort's temples, one of which honors Veda Vyasa, author of the Mahabharata and other important Hindu epics.

10.Darbhanga Ghat

Photographers, take note: Darbhanga Ghat offers the best opportunity to get amazing shots of Varanasi. The stairs leading down to the riverbank are crowned by the ultra-luxurious [BrijRama Palace](http://www.jdoqocy.com/click-2339553-10842362?URL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.tripadvisor.com%2FHotel_Review-s1-g297685-d8871544-Reviews-Brijrama_Palace-Varanasi_Varanasi_District_Uttar_Pradesh.html%3Fcja%3D10842362%26cjp%3D2339553%26m%3D13092), an old fort that has since been converted into a **heritage hotel.**The property's Greek pillars and rounded balconies give the area (and your photographs) a regal backdrop.

Plan to get here around dawn to capture unobstructed views of the incredible sunrise over the horizon of the Ganges River.