

Bihar & Jharkhand



The birthplace of Buddhism in India, Bihar occupies an important place in India's cultural and spiritual history. Siddhartha Gautama – the Buddha – spent much of his life here and attained enlightenment beneath a bodhi tree at Bodhgaya – making it the most significant Buddhist pilgrimage site in the world. Little more than a rural village, Bodhgaya is peppered with international monasteries and attracts devotees from around the world to meditate and soak up the powerful ambience. Following a trail of ancient and modern Buddhist sites, you can visit the extensive ruins of Nalanda, one of the ancient world's first universities, the many shrines and temples at nearby Rajgir, and the great Ashokan pillar at Vaishali.

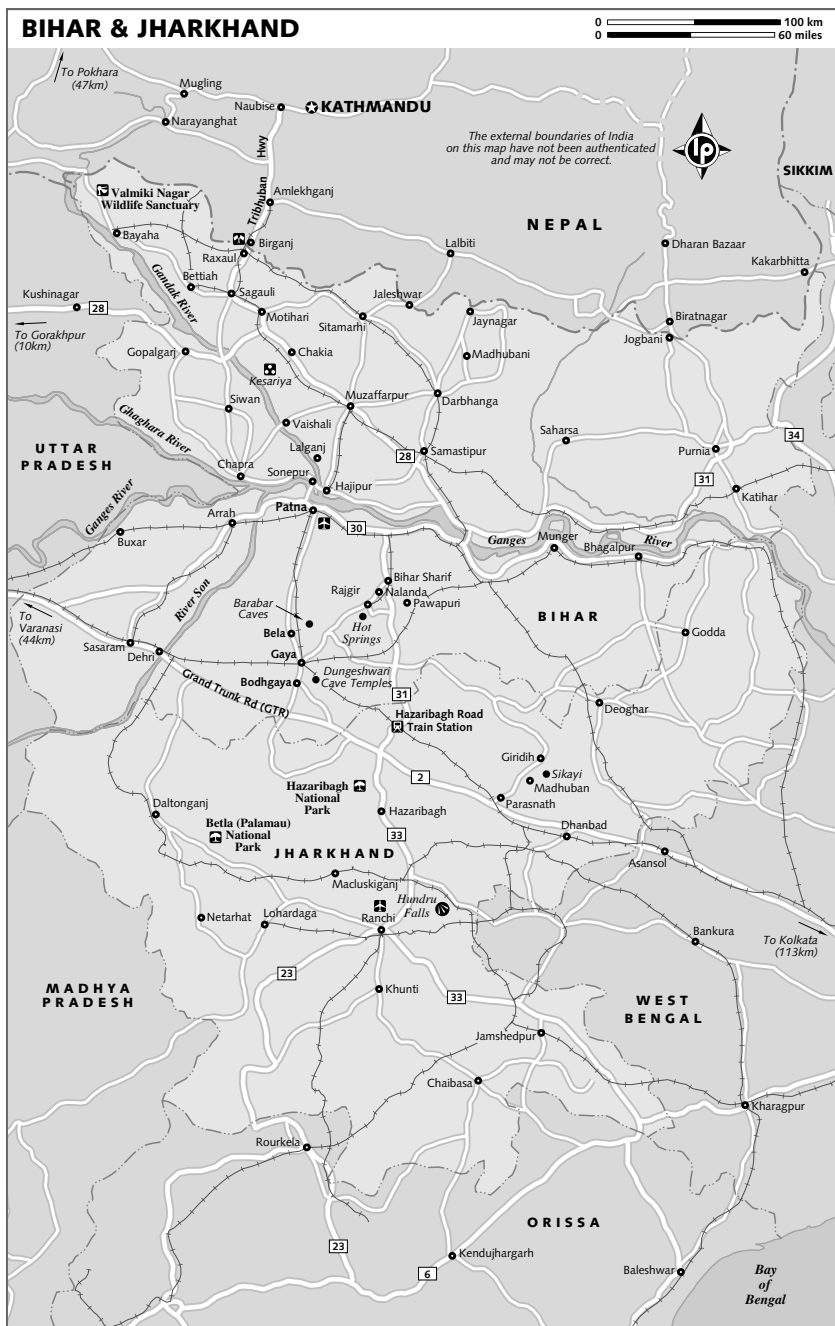
After a controversial vote in the Indian Parliament in August 2000, Bihar was split along tribal lines, creating the new southern state of Jharkhand. Home to numerous waterfalls and lush forests, Jharkhand is notable as the key Jain pilgrimage site in east India, though the state's best-kept secret is Betla National Park, where you can ride atop an elephant into the forest's depths in search of an elusive tiger.

Unfortunately, the twin states of Bihar and Jharkhand are one of India's poorest and most troubled regions. Wracked by widespread government corruption, sporadic intercaste warfare, kidnappings, extortion, banditry and Naxalite violence, Bihar remains the least literate and most lawless part of India – maligned as a basket case and the antithesis of the economically prosperous 'new India'. All this keeps it well off most travellers' radars, but don't be put off. This is India, barely diluted by tourism and all the more intriguing for it.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up the essence of Buddha at the serene Mahabodhi temple, then take a meditation class at a Buddhist monastery in **Bodhgaya** (p557)
- Conjure up the ghosts of pupils from the past among the fascinating ruins at **Nalanda** (p565), an ancient seat of learning
- Plug your nose and wade into India's largest livestock fair at the **Sonepur Mela** (p551) – an event that makes Pushkar's camel fair look like a Sunday market
- Volunteer at one of the local schools or charity organisations around **Bodhgaya** (p560)
- Glimpse a tiger from atop an elephant deep within the forest of the **Betla (Palamau) National Park** (p567)
- Visit Patna Museum, with its oddities and Buddha ashes, then shop for Mithila paintings in **Patna** (p552)





History

Prince Siddhartha Gautama arrived in Bihar during the 6th century BC and spent many years here, before leaving enlightened as the Buddha. The life of Mahavira, a contemporary of Buddha and the founder of Jainism, was also entwined with Bihar. In the 4th century BC, after Chandragupta Maurya seized power of the Magadha kingdom and its capital Pataliputra (now Patna), he expanded to the Indus Valley and created the first great Indian empire. His grandson, Ashoka, succeeded him and ruled the Mauryan empire from Pataliputra, which is rumoured to have been the largest city in the world at that time. Emperor Ashoka later embraced Buddhism, building stupas, monuments and his famous Ashokan pillars throughout northern India – notably at Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh) and Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh). In Bihar, Ashoka built the original shrine on the site of today's Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya (p558) and the lion-topped pillar at Vaishali (p556).

Bihar continued to be coveted by a succession of major empires until the Magadha dynasty rose again to glory during the reign of the Guptas (4th and 5th centuries AD), followed by the Palas of Bengal, who ruled until 1197.

Bihar was part of the Bengal presidency under the British Raj until 1912, when a separate state was formed. Part of this state later became Orissa and, most recently in 2000, Jharkhand.

Information

Although there are state tourism offices in every major town, they are uniformly useless – if staffed at all! The most helpful place for practical information on Bihar and Jharkhand

FAST FACTS

- Population: 82.9 million (Bihar), 26.9 million (Jharkhand)
- Area: 173,877 sq km
- Capital: Patna (Bihar), Ranchi (Jharkhand)
- Main language: Hindi
- When to go: October to March

is the **India tourism office** (☎ 2345776; goitopatna@vsnl.net) in Patna. Also try the following websites:

Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation (BSTDC; <http://bstdc.bih.nic.in>)

Bihar Tourism (www.discoverbihar.org.in)

Jharkhand Tourism (<http://jharkhand.nic.in/tourism/tour.htm>)

Dangers & Annoyances

The extreme poverty and general lawlessness in Bihar and Jharkhand can make buses and private hire cars targets for dacoits (bandits), who periodically use mock accidents and roadworks to stop vehicles. There has also been an alarming rise in banditry and violence reported aboard trains, despite an increasing military presence. Growing Maoist and Naxalite activity only adds to the region's reputation as the most dangerous in the country. While state authorities play down the law-and-order problems, newspaper reports and local attitudes suggest there is a long way to go towards cleaning up these states.

Foreign tourists are not specific targets and chances are you won't encounter any trouble, but it's a good idea to split up your valuables

FESTIVALS IN BIHAR & JHARKHAND

Pataliputra Mahotsava (Mar; Patna, p554) Patna celebrates its historic past with parades, sports, dancing and music.

Rajgir Mahotsava (24-26 Oct; Rajgir, p563) At the Indian Classical Performing Arts Festival, Indian folk dances are performed along with devotional song and instrumental music.

Chhath Festival (Oct/Nov; Bihar statewide) Biharis line river banks to celebrate this festival, which pays respects to Surya, the Sun God. At sunset on the sixth day after Diwali, married women, having fasted for two days, partially immerse themselves in nearby rivers offering fruits and flowers to the deity from bamboo baskets over a minimum two-hour period. The following sunrise, devotees return to the river and celebrate with prayers and traditional music.

Sonepur Mela (Nov/Dec; Sonepur, p556) With 700,000 devotees and countless thousands of animals taking part, this three-week festival is four times the size of Pushkar's camel fair and easily the region's largest and most odoriferous festival.

if making long journeys and avoid travelling after dusk. Always check the security situation before arriving: *Bihar Times* (www.bihartimes.com) and *Patna Daily* (www.patnadaily.com) have local news in English.

Flooding ensures that many roads, especially those on the northern flood plains, are unpassable during the monsoon and painfully potholed during the rest of the year, especially in Bihar.

For more information on security issues, see p1131.

BIHAR

PATNA

☎ 0612 / pop 1,285,470

Bihar's busy capital spreads out over a vast area on the south bank of the swollen and polluted Ganges, just east of the river's confluence with three major tributaries. Unlike Varanasi, there is little of interest along the river itself and Patna has only a handful of worthwhile sights, but it's a major transport hub for the state and a useful base for visiting the Buddhist sites of Vaishali, Kesariya and Rajgir. The 7.5km-long Mahatma Gandhi Seti, one of the world's longest river bridges, spans the Ganges between Patna and Hajipur.

Patna was once a powerful city. Early in the 5th century BC, Ajatasatru shifted his capital of the Magadha kingdom from Rajgir to Pataliputra (Patna), fulfilling Buddha's prophecy that a great city would arise here. Emperors Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka also called Pataliputra home and it remained one of India's most important cities for almost

WHO ARE THE NAXALITES?

Though the name would perfectly suit an alien species in an upcoming sci-fi movie, this term is used for various communist groups who continue to wage a violent struggle for land reform against landlords and India's power base on behalf of landless labourers and Adivasis (tribal people). During the spring of 1967, peasant cadres occupied land and staged a bloody uprising in the northern West Bengal village of Naxalbari, and from that day the guerrilla terrorists were termed Naxalites.

1000 years. The ruins of this ancient city sit submersed in Kumrahar, a southern district of Patna.

Orientation

The old and newer parts of Patna stretch along the southern bank of the Ganges for about 15km. The main train station, airport and hotels are in the western half, known as Bankipur, while most of the historic sites are in the teeming older Chowk area to the east.

Although Fraser, Exhibition and Boring Rds are being officially renamed Muzharul Haque Path, Braj Kishore Path and Jal Prakash Rd, respectively, the old names are still more commonly used.

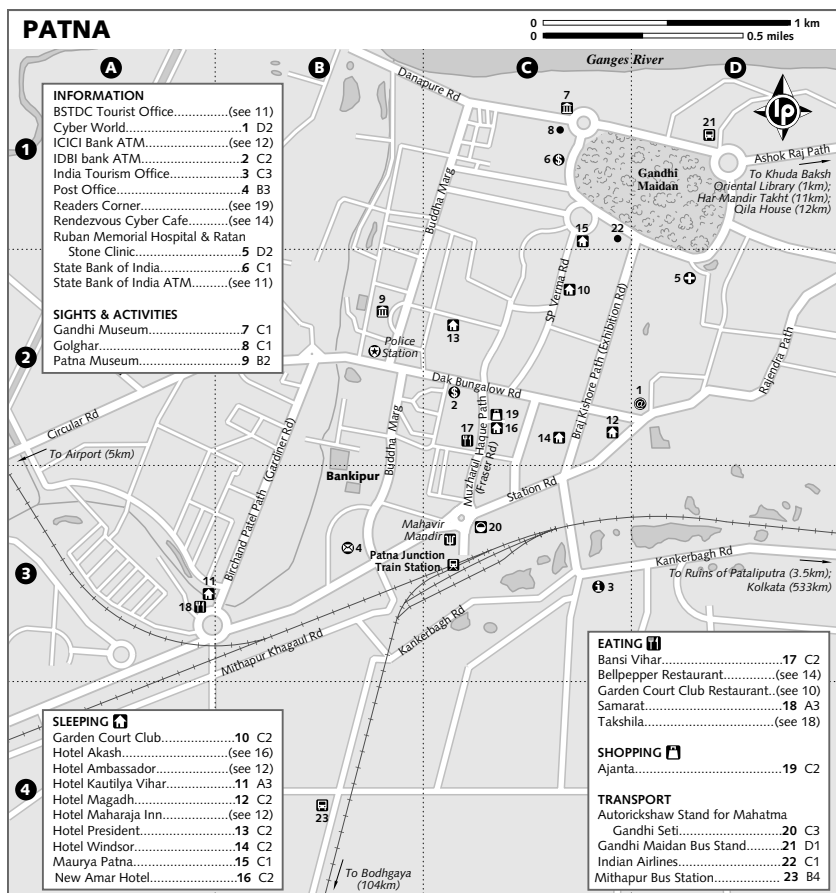
Information

BOOKSHOPS

Readers Corner (☎ 2225958; Fraser Rd; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) Next to Ajanta, one of Patna's best bookshops.

LALOO – LORD OF BIHAR

No chapter on Bihar would be complete without mention of India's most loathed and loved politician, Laloo Prasad Yadav. Although born into a low-caste family of cattle-herders, in a state where high-caste landowners have traditionally had a stranglehold on power, Laloo managed to mobilise the masses of his low-caste brethren and astonish all by rising to become chief minister of Bihar in 1990. Despite being a self-proclaimed champion of the poor, little improved for them under his rule and Bihar actually descended into bloody caste warfare. He remained in power until 1997, when he was arrested and accused of milking millions of dollars out of an animal-husbandry programme. He stepped down, and in a move that shocked the nation, he placed his illiterate wife Rabri Devi as chief minister. He served little time behind bars and is now back and as popular as ever. Although his wife was replaced as chief minister by Nitish Kumar in 2005, Laloo continues to live the high-profile life as Minister of Railways for the Indian government and has been credited with many improvements to the rail system. As *Indiatimes* once stated, 'Love him or loathe him, you can't ignore Laloo Prasad Yadav'.



robbery can be a real problem. Groups should still take care and avoid carrying bags or valuables, which could encourage theft.

Sights & Activities

GANDHI MAIDAN AREA

Just south of the river, Gandhi Maidan is a large, flat park area around which are a couple of sights. For a dome with a view, head up to the landmark **Golghar** (Danapure Rd; admission free; ☎ 24hr), a short walk west of the maidan. This massive and bulbous beehive of a granary was built by the British army in 1786, in the hope of avoiding a repeat performance of the vicious 1770 famine – fortunately it was never required. Its dual spiralling staircases (250 steps each side), designed so that workers could climb up one side and down the other, lead to an unparalleled view of the city and Ganges. Nearby is the diminutive **Gandhi Museum** (☎ 2225339; Danapure Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am–6pm Sun–Fri), which contains a pictorial history of the Mahatma's life.

PATNA MUSEUM

Behind the vibrant but decaying Mughal and Rajput-inspired exterior, this **museum** (☎ 2235731; Buddha Marg; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/250; ☎ 10.30am–4.30pm Tue–Sun) houses a splendid collection of stone sculptures dating from the Mauryan and Gupta periods, including the celebrated, larger-than-life statue of the voluptuous Yakshini. In another gallery is a motley collection of stuffed animals, including tigers, a large gharial crocodile and a bizarre three-eared and eight-legged goat kid! Upstairs there are several 17th-century *thangkas* (rectangular Tibetan painting on cloth), which were interestingly influenced by Indian frescoes. Some travellers may be put off by the high entry fee, but there's more. Upstairs in a locked gallery you must pay an additional Rs 500 to see the 'Relic of the Buddha': behind a glass case in a tiny casket within a small stupa is believed to be some of Buddha's ashes, retrieved from Vaishali – you'll have to take their word for it!

HAR MANDIR TAKHT

Behind a grand gate and sheltered from the mayhem of Patna's Chowk area is this **Sikh shrine** (☎ 2642000), one of the nation's four holiest. Its miniature marble domes, sweeping staircases and fine lattice work mark the spot where Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the 10 Sikh gurus, was born in 1660. It's 11km east of Gandhi Maidan.

KHUDA BAKSH ORIENTAL LIBRARY

This fascinating **library** (☎ 2300209; Ashok Raj Path; admission free; ☎ 9am–5pm Sat–Thu) was founded in 1900 and contains a renowned collection of Arabic and Persian manuscripts, Mughal and Rajput paintings, and even the Quran inscribed in a book only 25mm wide.

QILA HOUSE (JALAN MUSEUM)

This intriguing and eclectic private **museum** (☎ 2641121; Jalan Ave; ☎ by appointment only) overflows with antiques ranging from elaborate Mughal-period silverware to the humorously short bed of Napoleon Bonaparte. Look for Marie Antoinette's Sèvres porcelain and the garish Crown Derby dinner service picked out by the failing eyes of King George III.

RUINS OF PATALIPUTRA

While historic, these **ruins** (Kankerbagh Rd; Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9am–5.30pm) are best visited in scuba gear – ground-water levels ensure they are submerged year-round. Excavations of this ancient capital have found evidence from the periods of Ajatasatru (491–459 BC), Chandragupta (321–297 BC) and Ashoka (274–237 BC). The ruins/ponds are surrounded by lovely gardens and a **museum** that details the site's historic past.

Festivals & Events

Patna honours its historic past every March with **Pataliputra Mahotsava**, a celebration featuring parades, sports, dancing and music.

MITHILA PAINTINGS

Bihar's unique and most famous folk art is its Mithila (or Madhubani) paintings. Traditionally, wives from Madhubani and surrounding villages started creating strong line drawings on the walls of their homes from the day of their marriage. Using pigments from spices, minerals, charcoal and vegetable matter, the women painted local deities and scenes from mythology, often intermingled with special events and aspects of everyday life.

These paintings, in both black and white and strong primary colours, are now being professionally produced on paper, canvas and textiles for sale in cities such as Patna. Original wall paintings can still be seen in homes around Madhubani, 160km northeast of Patna.

Sleeping

The modern western half of the city has plenty of accommodation choices, mainly around Fraser and Station Rds.

BUDGET

New Amar Hotel (☎ 2224157; s/d Rs 170/246) The bright-green New Amar is the best of several budget hotels down a small lane off Fraser Rd. Rooms are simple and cleanish.

Hotel Magadh (☎ 2321278; Station Rd; s/d Rs 350/500, with AC Rs 600/750; 🚿) Midrange comfort at a budget price makes this hotel the best value in Patna. The singles are small with squat toilet but the doubles are spacious, bright and clean, and all rooms have TV and hot water.

Hotel Kautilya Vihar (☎ 2225411; bstdc@sancharnet.in; Birchand Patel Path; dm Rs 75, d Rs 500-700, with AC Rs 800; 🚿) This sprawling government hotel has a range of rooms that are clean and spacious. It lacks much atmosphere but there's a restaurant and bar and eager staff. The six-bed dorms are cramped.

Also recommended:

Hotel Akash (☎ 2239599; d Rs 250) If the New Amar Hotel's full, try its neighbour Akash with similar facilities.

Hotel Ambassador (☎/fax 2321903; Station Rd; s/d Rs 350/500, with AC Rs 650/750; 🚿) Next door to Hotel Magadh and nearly identical.

Hotel Maharaja Inn (☎ 2321292; Station Rd; s/d Rs 350/500, d with AC Rs 750-850; 🚿) In the same vein (and street) as the Ambassador and Magadh but with the bonus of a 24-hour checkout.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Garden Court Club (☎ 3096229; SP Verma Rd; s/d from 600/800; 🚿) With only six rooms, the Garden Court Club is an intimate hotel tucked away in a small shopping complex. Comfortable rooms all have AC and there's a communal lounge, but the biggest draw is the lovely open-air garden restaurant.

Hotel President (☎ 2209200; s/d from Rs 450/500, with AC Rs 750/900; 🚿) This family-run hotel is in a relatively quiet location off Fraser Rd and close to Patna Museum. Rooms are simple, clean and reasonable value with TV and bucket hot water.

ourpick Hotel Windsor (☎ 220325058; www.hotelwindsorpatna.com; Exhibition Rd; s/d/ste Rs 900/1100/1350; 🚿) Rooms in this thoughtfully designed hotel offer contemporary décor, fine woodwork, spotless bathrooms and AC throughout, making this Patna's top mid-range choice.

Maurya Patna (☎ 220304059; www.maurya.com; South Gandhi Maidan; s/d from Rs 2800/3500; 🚿 🚿 🚿) Fine appointments and luxurious surroundings are found throughout Patna's top business hotel. The large gardens host a tempting pool (Rs 350 for nonguests), and there are two good restaurants and a bar. Rooms are tastefully furnished and centrally air-conditioned.

Eating & Drinking

Busy Fraser Rd, between the train station and Dak Bungalow Rd, is the main shopping street and is lined with restaurants and a few bars. For Patna's best restaurants, check out the big hotels, especially Maurya Patna and Hotel Chanakya; the latter also has a comfortable bar.

Bansi Vihar (Fraser Rd; mains Rs 30-70) Locals crowd into this spotless air-conditioned restaurant to enjoy cheap South Indian *masala dosa* (savoury crepe), Chinese specials and friendly service.

Garden Court Club (☎ 3096229; SP Verma Rd; mains Rs 35-80; 🍷 6am-11pm) Few places are as enjoyable for lunch or dinner as this plant-filled, open-air rooftop terrace, serving Indian and Chinese dishes.

Bellpepper Restaurant (Exhibition Rd; mains Rs 50-200; 🍷 noon-3.30pm & 7-11pm; 🚿) This intimate, contemporary restaurant in the Hotel Windsor is popular for its sublime tandoori specialities. The *murg tikka lababdar* (tandoori chicken basted with garlic, ginger, green chillies, and pistachio and cashew nut paste) is divine, and Afghani dishes and Hyderabad biryanis share the menu with Chinese specialities. No alcohol is served.

Samarat (Hotel Chanakya, Birchand Patel Path; mains Rs 130-225; 🍷 noon-11pm; 🚿) Based in Hotel Chanakya, this is an elegant dining experience, with Indian, Chinese and continental dishes served in a bright and busy restaurant.

ourpick Takshila (☎ 2220590; Hotel Chanakya, Birchand Patel Path; mains Rs 80-375; 🍷 noon-3.30pm & 7.30-11pm) From the solid furniture and exposed brick décor to the succinct menu printed on a slab of wood, Takshila exudes the ambience of the North West Frontier. The speciality is meat-heavy Mughlai, Afghan and tandoor dishes – the signature dish *raan-e-takshila* is a whole leg of mutton marinated in spices and cooked in the tandoor for at least 45 minutes. Also in Hotel Chanakya.

Shopping

Patna is one of the best places in Bihar to buy Mithila paintings (see opposite).

Ajanta (☎ 2224432; Hotel Satka Arcade, Fraser Rd; ☎ 10.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) Come here for Patna's best selection of Mithila paintings. Although most of the stock on display appears to be bronzes, the owner can show you a wide range of unmounted paintings starting from Rs 300.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Indian Airlines (☎ 2222554; Gandhi Maidan) flies daily to Delhi (US\$124), Mumbai (US\$172) and Ranchi (US\$73). **Air Deccan** (www.airdeccan.net) offers cheaper internet fares to Delhi and Kolkata.

BUS

The new main bus station (Mithapur Bus Station) occupies a large, dusty space about 2km south of the train station, and is simply referred to as 'the new bus stand'. Services include buses to Gaya (Rs 50, three hours, hourly), Rajgir (Rs 50, four hours, hourly), Ranchi (Rs 180, 10 hours, 8pm and 9pm) and Raxaul (Rs 100, eight hours).

From the Gandhi Maidan bus stand government bus services go to Ranchi (Rs 170, 10 hours, four daily) and the Nepal border at Raxaul (Rs 109, eight hours, daily at 9.15am and 10pm).

CAR

Hiring a car and driver is a convenient option for visiting Kesariya, Vaishali or Nalanda for the day. Most hotels and the India tourism office can arrange this service for Rs 6.5 per kilometre (minimum 200km). Arrange an early start as few drivers will operate after dark.

TRAIN

Patna Junction is a chaotic station but there's a foreign-tourist ticket counter at window No 7 in the 1st-floor reservation office.

Although a little way off the main Delhi-Kolkata line, there are around eight daily trains to Kolkata (sleeper/3AC Rs 218/615, eight to 11 hours), 10 to Delhi (sleeper/3AC Rs 321/905 12 to 16 hours) and four to New Jalpaiguri (Siliguri, for Darjeeling and Sikkim; sleeper/3AC Rs 195/549, nine to 12 hours). Several daily services run to Varanasi (2nd class/sleeper Rs 65/112, five hours), Gaya (sleeper/chair Rs 101/142, 3½ hours, 11.30am and 9.35pm) and Ranchi (sleeper/chair Rs 170/370, 10 hours, 11.30am, 3.30pm and 9.35pm).

Getting Around

The airport is 7km west of the city centre. Autorickshaws to/from the city cost Rs 80, while taxis cost around Rs 180.

Shared autorickshaws shuttle back and forth between the train station and Gandhi Maidan bus stand (Rs 3). For short trips, cycle-rickshaws are Patna's most plentiful form of transport.

SONEPUR

☎ 06654

According to the Gajendra Moksha legend, Sonepur is where Vishnu ended the prehistoric battle between the lords of the forest (elephants) and lords of the water (crocodiles). Each November/December, on the full moon of Kartik Purnima, the three-week **Sonepur Mela** (www.sonepurmela.com) begins to celebrate the infamous tale. During this auspicious time, devotees bathe in the Ganges while Asia's largest cattle fair takes place at Haathi bazaar. You'll see more than mere bovines for sale – elephants change hands for anything from Rs 10,000 to 100,000. Considering purchasing an alternative form of transport? Mark Shand's *Travels on my Elephant* is essential reading for the modern-day mahout (elephant rider/master).

BSTDC in Patna operates **temporary cottages** (☎ 2225411; dm/d Rs 50/1000) during the fair.

Sonepur is 25km north of Patna across the Mahatma Gandhi Seti bridge spanning the Ganges. Shared autorickshaws (Rs 5) run to the south side of the Mahatma Gandhi Seti from the stand near Mahavir Mandir. An autorickshaw direct to Sonepur should cost around Rs 150.

VAISHALI

☎ 06225

In the 6th century BC, Vaishali was home to one of the world's first democratic republics. It's also where Lord Mahavira, the 24th and final Jain *tirthankar* (teacher), was born and raised. Buddha preached his last sermon here, where today the ruins of the **Kolhua Complex** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ dawn-dusk) lay. Most remarkable is the noble lion atop the 2300-year-old Ashoka pillar. Another set of ruins, 3km away, contains a stupa where an eighth of Buddha's ashes were recovered. Nearby there's a small **museum** (admission Rs 2; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu) and a gleaming **Japanese Peace Pagoda**.

Hotel Amrapali Vihar (☎ 229982; dm/d Rs 70/250), a BSTDC hotel, has bright rooms, as well as a dormitory.

Regular buses run to/from Hajipur and Muzaffarpur. To reach Hajipur from Patna, catch a shared autorickshaw to the south side of Mahatma Gandhi Seti and another from there. Hiring a car in Patna is the best way to visit Vaishali and Kesariya in a day.

KESARIYA

Rising 10 storeys out of the earth, where the dying Buddha donated his begging bowl, is an enthralling juxtaposition of history and nature. Each year archaeologists continue to remove nature's lush, forested veil, revealing what's likely the world's 2nd-tallest Buddhist stupa, dating from the Pala period. From above, the nine uniquely shaped terraces (seven currently exposed) form a gargantuan Buddhist tantric mandala diagram with a circumference of 425m.

Sporadic shared jeeps shuttle between Kesariya and Chakia (Rs 25, one hour), which is on the potholed highway between Patna and Raxaul, but due to a lack of accommodation in Kesariya and Chakia, most people hire a car in Patna and make it a long day trip.

RAXAUL

☎ 06255 / pop 41,347

Raxaul, a grimy, crowded border town, is virtually a twin town with Birganj in Nepal. Neither are places to hang around. If you must spend the night, head to **Hotel Kaveri** (☎ 221148; Main Rd; d from Rs 250), which has the cleanest rooms.

There are several early morning buses from Raxaul to Patna (Rs 100, eight hours). The

Mithila Express train runs daily from Kolkata to Raxaul (sleeper/3AC/2AC Rs 256/723/1037) departing at 3.45pm and arriving at 8.25am.

BODHGAYA

☎ 0631 / pop 30,883

Buddhist pilgrims from around the world are drawn to Bodhgaya. It was here, 26 centuries ago, that Prince Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment beneath a bodhi tree and so became the Buddha. A beautifully serene temple marks the spot and a descendent of that original Bodhi Tree remains, its roots happily clutching the same soil as its celebrated ancestor.

Monasteries and temples, built by international Buddhist communities, are peppered around and attract pilgrims to study, meditate and absorb the ambience. Bodhgaya is not so much a town as a true Buddhist working centre surrounded by farmland and rural villages, but it has the best range of accommodation and eating in Bihar and the attendant accumulation of tourist paraphernalia and souvenir stalls.

The best time to visit is October through March, when Tibetan pilgrims come down from Dharamsala and Bodhgaya becomes a sea of maroon robes. The Dalai Lama himself often spends December and January here.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Kundan Bazaar (Bodhgaya Rd; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat)
Great selection of novels and Buddhist literature.

CROSSING INTO NEPAL

Border Hours

The border is open 24 hours on the Indian side, but visas (US\$30) are only available from 5.30am to 8pm on the Nepali side.

Foreign Exchange

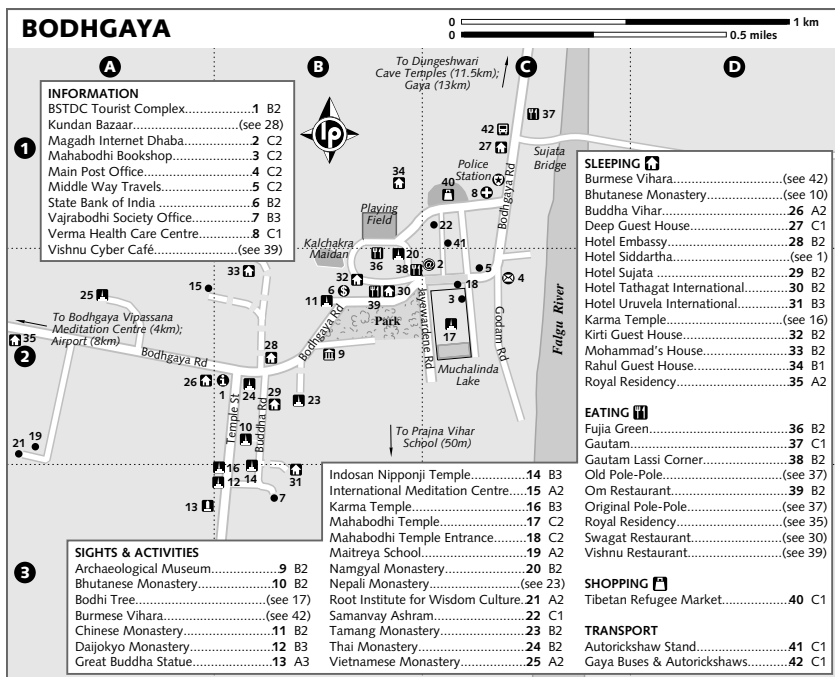
The State Bank of India in Raxaul will change Indian rupees and major currencies and has an ATM. Foreign-exchange facilities are also available in Birganj on the Nepal side of the border.

Onward Transport

It's a Rs 30 autorickshaw from Raxaul's bus or train station to Birganj, 5km away. From here there are direct buses to Kathmandu (Rs 250 to 500, eight hours) and Pokhara (Rs 250 to 500, 10 hours).

Visas

Nepali visas are available at the border, with two passport photos and payment in US dollars.



Mahabodhi Bookshop (☎ 2200735; Mahabodhi Temple; ☏ 5am-9pm) Inside the entrance to the temple complex; good range of Buddhist literature.

INTERNET ACCESS

Magadh Internet Dhaba (Bodhgaya Rd; per hr Rs 40; ☏ 8am-9pm)

Vishnu Cyber Cafe (Bodhgaya Rd; per hr Rs 30)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Verma Health Care Centre (☎ 2201101; ☏ 24hr) Emergency room and clinic.

MONEY

State Bank of India (☎ 2200852; Bodhgaya Rd; ☏ 10.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, till 1pm Sat) Best rates for cash and travellers cheques. ATM accepts foreign cards.

POST

Main post office (☎ 2200472; cnr Bodhgaya & Godam Rds; ☏ 10am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

BSTDC Tourist Complex (☎ 2200672; cnr Bodhgaya Rd & Temple St; ☏ 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sat) Little more than dusty brochures.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Middle Way Travels (☎ 2200648; www.middleway2006@yahoo.com; Bodhgaya Rd; ☏ 9am-10pm) Almost opposite the temple entrance, this is the best of Bodhgaya's travel agencies. Currency and travellers cheques exchanged, book exchange, ticketing and car hire.

Sights & Activities

MAHABODHI TEMPLE

The spiritual centrepiece of Bodhgaya, adjacent to the spot where Buddha attained enlightenment and formulated his philosophy of life, is the magnificent World Heritage-listed **Mahabodhi Temple** (admission free, camera/video Rs 20/300; ☏ 5am-9pm).

The Mahabodhi Temple was built in the 6th century AD atop the site of a temple erected by Emperor Ashoka almost 800 years earlier. After being razed by 11th-century Muslim invaders, the temple underwent major restorations, the last in 1882. Topped by a 50m pyramidal spire, the ornate structure houses a 2m-high gilded image of a seated Buddha. Amazingly, four of the original sculpted stone railings surrounding the temple, dating from the Sunga period (184-72 BC), have survived amid the replicas.

Thankfully, before Ashoka's wife murdered the original **Bodhi Tree**, a sapling from it was carried to Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, by Sanghamitta (Ashoka's daughter). That tree continues to flourish and from which, in turn, a cutting was carried back to Bodhgaya and planted where the original had stood. The red sandstone slab between the tree and the rear of the temple was placed there by Ashoka, and marks the spot of Buddha's enlightenment – it's referred to as the Vajrasan (Diamond Throne).

The temple complex is a serene network of paths, gardens, shrines, votive stupas and a meditation park. To the south is the **Muchalinda Lake**, a lotus pond surrounded by prayer flags and with a cobra statue rising from the centre. Legend has it Buddha meditated here on the sixth week after enlightenment and was sheltered from a violent storm by the snake god of the lake.

Pilgrims and visitors from all walks of life and religions come here to worship or just admire. An enthralling way to start or finish the day is with a stroll around the perimeter of the temple compound, threading your way through monks from around the world, each soaking up the ambience of this sacred place.

An audio headset guide (Rs 20), available from the camera ticket counter, offers a one-hour commentary in English, Hindi, Japanese or Korean.

MONASTERIES & TEMPLES

Thanks to most countries with a large Buddhist population having a temple or monastery here, Bodhgaya offers visitors a unique opportunity to peek into different Buddhist cultures. Head to the beautiful **Indosan Nipponji Temple** (Japanese temple) at 6am and 5pm daily for the free one-hour Zazen sessions (Zen meditation).

In an intriguing display of architecture, monasteries are designed in a representative style of their homeland. The most impressive is the **Thai Monastery**, a brightly coloured wat with shimmering gold leaf and manicured gardens. Meditation sessions are held here in the morning. The Tibetan **Karma Temple** and **Namgyal Monastery** each contain large prayer wheels, and the massive Indosan Nipponji Temple is donned with a Japanese pagoda roof. Other noteworthy monasteries include the **Chinese, Burmese, Bhutanese, Vietnamese, Tamang, Daijokyo** and **Nepali**. Monasteries are open sunrise to sunset.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

At the end of Temple St and reached via a pleasant garden towers the 25m-high **Great Buddha Statue** (☎ 7am-noon & 2-5pm). The impressive monument was unveiled by the Dalai Lama in 1989, and is surrounded by 10 smaller sculptures of Buddha's disciples. The statue is partially hollow and is said to contain some 20,000 bronze Buddhas.

The **archaeological museum** (☎ 2200739; admission Rs 2; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu) contains a small collection of local Buddha figures, but pride of place goes to part of the original granite railings and pillars rescued from the Mahabodhi Temple.

Courses

Additional meditation courses to those below typically run from October through to March and are sometimes advertised at local restaurants and the Burmese Vihara.

Established by *vipassana* (the insight meditation technique of Theravada Buddhism in which mind and body are closely examined as changing phenomena) guru SN Goenka, the **Bodhgaya Vipassana Meditation Centre** (Dhamma Bodhi; ☎ 220437; www.dhamma.org) runs intensive 10-day *vipassana* courses twice each month throughout the year. The small compound is 4km west of town and runs on donations.

Three nine-day *vipassana* meditation and spiritual inquiry retreats are held by **Insight Meditation Retreats** (www.insightmeditation.org) from 7 January to 6 February at the Thai Monastery. Space is limited so book ahead. From mid-November you can inquire at the Burmese Vihara between 3pm and 4pm. Donations are requested.

The courses at the **International Meditation Centre** (☎ 2200707; per day Rs 100) are more informal and students can start and finish any time they choose, year-round.

The popular introductory 10-day meditation courses run by the **Root Institute for Wisdom Culture** (☎ 2200714; www.rootinstitute.com) go from late October through March and are excellent for beginners. A requested donation of Rs 5800 will cover your course, accommodation and meals. Intermediate level courses are also scheduled from December to February and, for serious students, a one-month Mahayana Vipassana retreat is organised during February. The institute also holds talks and meditation sessions that are open to all comers – the website has a full schedule.

Sleeping

Bodhgaya is packed with places to stay and everything is within walking distance or a short cycle-rickshaw ride of the Mahabodhi Temple. Prices listed are for the high season (November through March) – they can fall up to 50% in the low season so be prepared to negotiate.

BUDGET

Buddha Vihar (☎ 2200127; Bodhgaya Rd; dm Rs 75-100)

The dormitory accommodation at the tourism complex is clean and cheap.

Deep Guest House (☎ 2200463; Bodhgaya Rd; d with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/300) Clean rooms and friendly service make this place near the bus stand a great choice. Rooms are bright and airy, and even the shared bathrooms are kept clean.

Mohammad's House (☎ 2200690; d with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/250) It may be a bit earthy for some, but just getting to this simple family homestay is an adventure. It's hidden among local homes north of the main road (ask directions). Rooms are very basic, but the

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CHARITY

Central Bihar is one of the poorest parts of India and with its influx of visitors and Buddhist pilgrims, Bodhgaya has become home to numerous charity organisations and schools that rely on donations and volunteers. Some of these are less than noble – set up by shady characters looking for an easy way to jump on the charity bandwagon and fleece tourists. Be wary of anyone who approaches you in the street looking for donations, including the young children who besiege tourists asking for money for everything from educational sponsorship to a new cricket bat – they speak several languages but are more than likely illiterate. Genuine charities advise that you don't give money directly to children. If you'd like to help, donate to legitimate institutions or visit local schools and offer to volunteer. The following organisations are worthy causes:

- **Maitreya School** (☎ 2200620; www.maitreyaeducation.org) One of the largest and most established school projects in Bodhgaya, Maitreya has over 500 students attending day and evening classes. As well as education, free uniforms, books, meals and health care are provided. You can sponsor a child for a year (US\$140).
- **Niranjana Public Welfare School** (☎ 9934057511; www.npws.org) In Bakrou Village, this school provides education for some 300 local children and runs an orphanage. Donations, sponsorships and volunteers are welcome. Contact the curator Siddhartha Kumar.
- **Prajna Vihar School** Volunteers are sometimes required for this nonprofit village school just south of the Mahabodhi Temple. For information, contact the Burmese Vihar (☎ 2200721).
- **Root Institute for Wisdom Culture** (☎ 2200714; www.rootinstitute.com) This Buddhist meditation centre runs an established charitable health programme in the district, providing free health care to villagers via an onsite hospital and mobile clinic. Visitors are welcome to call in to the institute to see the health programme at work. Skilled volunteers (nurses, physiotherapists etc) are occasionally needed to train local health workers – see the volunteer section of the website.
- **Samanvay Ashram** (☎ 0631-2200506; samanvayashram@hotmail.com) Also called the Gandhi Ashram, this has been run for many years by Dwarko Sundrani, and works with disadvantaged village children providing education, clothing and medicine. Volunteers are welcome to help with fieldwork and activities with the children. Free lodging and meals, but volunteers are expected to take part in morning prayers, cooking and chores.
- **Sujata Children's Welfare Foundation** (☎ 9431207949; www.sujata.onestop.net) Sujata works with local orphans and poor children, providing free education, clothing and medical care. You can sponsor a child through the organisation's website, or volunteer with teaching skills and building projects at Sujata Village just outside Bodhgaya.
- **Vajrabodhi Society** (☎ 2330576; www.vajrabodhisocietyindia.org) This society currently runs two schools offering free literacy and education programmes for underprivileged children in the Bodhgaya district. There are also plans to build a hospital. You can sponsor the annual education of a child (Rs 12,000), make donations, or volunteer with teaching skills or community projects.

rooftop terrace offers pleasant views of rice paddies, sunsets and the distant Mahabodhi Temple.

Rahul Guest House (s/d Rs 150/250) The upstairs rooms with whitewashed walls, nice breezes and simple furnishings are better than those on the ground floor, but overall this budget place is clean. It's a short walk across the playing field near Kalchakra Maidan.

If you don't mind abiding by some simple rules and attending daily prayers, it's possible to stay at some of the monasteries. The **Bhutanese Monastery** (☎ 2200710; Buddha Rd; d with shared/private bathroom Rs 150/250) is a tranquil place typified by colourful surroundings, gardens and big rooms. The Tibetan **Karma Temple** (☎ 2200795; Temple St; d with shared bathroom Rs 200) has a similar feel. The **Burmese Vihara** (☎ 2200721; Bodhgaya Rd; r Rs 50) is popular with foreigners; there's a maximum stay of three days unless you're engaged in dharma studies.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Siddhartha (☎ 2200127; Bodhgaya Rd; d Rs 400, with AC Rs 600) This is the best of the accommodation in the BSTDC tourism complex, though it's still a bit austere. Rooms are in an unusual circular building overlooking a quiet garden area. Rates are fixed year-round, making it good value from November to January.

Hotel Embassy (☎ 2200799; embassyhotelbodhgaya@yahoo.com; Bodhgaya Rd; s/d Rs 500/600, with AC Rs 800/900; 🚽) This central, no-frills hotel is looking a bit old and dated, though all rooms have TV and hot water and the management is welcoming.

Kirti Guest House (☎ 2200744; near Kalchakra Maidan; s/d Rs 700/850) Run by the Tibetan Monastery and one of the best of the midrange places, Kirti has clean, bright rooms behind a monastery-like façade. Go for one of the front rooms opening out onto the balcony. All rooms have TV and hot water.

Hotel Uruvela International (☎ 2200235; s/d Rs 750/1000, with AC Rs 1000/1400; 🚽) Spacious rooms, some a little ornate and overdecorated, have the usual facilities at this quiet, friendly hotel near the Japanese temple. Low-season discount is 40%.

Hotel Tathagat International (☎ 2200106; www.ho.teltathagatbodhgaya.net; Bodhgaya Rd; s/d Rs 1125/1350, with AC Rs 1350/1700; 🚽) Simple and conservatively furnished rooms, but it's clean and efficiently run. Some rooms have balconies and all have TV and hot water.

TOP END

Hotel Sujata (☎ 2200761; www.hotelsujata.com; Buddha Rd; s/d/ste Rs 2400/2800/3600; 🚽) Swish, spacious rooms with soft beds, an excellent restaurant, and his and hers *o-furo* (communal Japanese baths) make this hotel, opposite the Thai Monastery, best value in the top-end range. Unfortunately, the Japanese bath is only available to groups of 10 or more.

Royal Residency (☎ 2200124; www.theroyalresidency.net/bodhgaya; Bodhgaya Rd; s/d US\$120/150; 🚽) Bodhgaya's most luxurious hotel is in a quiet location about 1.5km west of the centre. Fine woodwork, rich marble, pleasant gardens and comfy rooms, but still overpriced.

Eating

With such a diverse range of pilgrims and travellers filing in, Bodhgaya has plenty of places to eat. During the peak season from mid-November to February, when Tibetan pilgrims pour into Bodhgaya, temporary tent restaurants set up next to the Tibetan refugee market, at Kalchakra Maidan and near the Great Buddha Statue, serving a range of Tibetan dishes and sweets such as apple pie and cinnamon rolls.

There are decent restaurants along the main road in the village centre, while the best dining experiences are in a handful of midrange and top-end hotels.

Fujia Green (Kalchakra Maidan; mains Rs 15-70) A popular year-round tent restaurant, Fujia Green serves up wonderful Tibetan fare, such as *momos* (dumplings), *thukpas* and *then-thuks* (types of noodle soup), as well as tasty chicken dishes.

Swagat Restaurant (Bodhgaya Rd; mains Rs 50-150; 🚽) At Hotel Tathagat International, this is a good choice with an innovative menu of veg and nonveg dishes, such as *mutton badam pasanda* (boneless mutton stuffed with almonds and cooked in an almond gravy), Portuguese-style fish and a creamy malai kofta.

Royal Residency (Bodhgaya Rd; mains Rs 70-150; 🚽) Considering it's in Bodhgaya's most upmarket hotel, the restaurant itself is plain on décor and disappointingly cramped, but the food is good with some of the best Chinese and North Indian fare in town. This is the only restaurant in Bodhgaya to serve alcohol, but at Rs 250 for a beer it's a real luxury!

Other recommendations:

Gautam Lassi Corner (Bodhgaya Rd) Opposite Mahabodhi Temple, serves up creamy lassis, coffee, juice and chowmein for Rs 10.

Vishnu Restaurant (Bodhgaya Rd) Opposite the park, a reliable travellers' menu of Indian, Chinese, continental and Tibetan food. Cramped inside but there are shady tables out the front.

Om Restaurant (Bodhgaya Rd) Next door to Vishnu, this place is similar.

Opposite the Burmese Vihara on Bodhgaya Rd are the long-running and popular semi-tent restaurants **Original Pole-Pole** (mains Rs 20-80), **Old Pole-Pole** (mains Rs 20-80) and the **Gautam** (mains Rs 20-80). They're pretty basic and each has a varied but standard travellers' menu of breakfast fare, pancakes, pasta and Indian and Chinese, along with sweets such as chocolate-chip cookies or cinnamon rolls.

Shopping

Tibetan refugee market (📅 Oct-Jan) A great place to pick up some winter woollens or textiles, and you'll be helping the Tibetan community in exile. Souvenir stalls set up opposite the temple selling everything from prayer flags and postcards to Buddha statues.

Getting There & Away

Overly crowded shared autorickshaws (Rs 8) and occasional buses (Rs 5) leave the Burmese Vihara for the 13km to Gaya. A private autorickshaw to Gaya should cost Rs 80.

The **Gaya airport** (📞 2201155) is 8km from town. While there is only one Indian Airlines domestic flight a week to/from Kolkata (US\$88), during the high season there are direct international flights from Bangkok and Yangon.

DUNGESHWARI CAVE TEMPLES

The Dungeshwari cave temples, where Buddha underwent years of penance before descending to Bodhgaya, are 12km northeast of Bodhgaya. Three main caves contain several shrines for Buddhists and one for Hindus.

From Bodhgaya, grab a Gaya-bound shared autorickshaw to Khiryama (Rs 5), where you'll find to walk across the bridge. There you'll find a path on the right-hand side that leads you 5km to the caves. Alternatively, you can hire an autorickshaw in Bodhgaya for the entire trip (Rs 200).

GAYA

📞 0631 / pop 383,197

Gaya is a raucous, dusty town about 100km south of Patna. Although it's a centre for Hindu pilgrims, it's really only of interest to

travellers as the transport hub for Bodhgaya, 13km away. Pilgrims come here to offer pinda (funeral cake) at the ghats along the river, and perform a lengthy circuit of the holy places around Gaya to free their ancestors from bondage to the earth.

There's a **Bihar State tourist office** (📞 2420155; 🕒 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) and a State Bank of India ATM at the train station. The nearest foreign exchange for cash and travellers cheques is in Bodhgaya. There are several **internet cafés** (per hr Rs 20) along Swarajapur Rd.

Sights & Activities

Close to the banks of the Falgu River south of town, the *sikhara* (spired) **Vishnupad Temple** was constructed in 1787 by Queen Ahalya Bai of Indore and houses a 40cm 'footprint' of Vishnu imprinted in solid rock. Non-Hindus are not permitted to enter, but you can get a look at the temple from the pink platform near the entrance. Along the ghats on the river's edge, Hindus bathe and light funeral pyres.

One thousand stone steps leads to the top of the **Brahmajuni Hill**, 1km southwest of the Vishnupad Temple, where Buddha is said to have preached the fire sermon. The view from the top of Gaya and the surrounding plains is expansive, and there's a small temple and cave here.

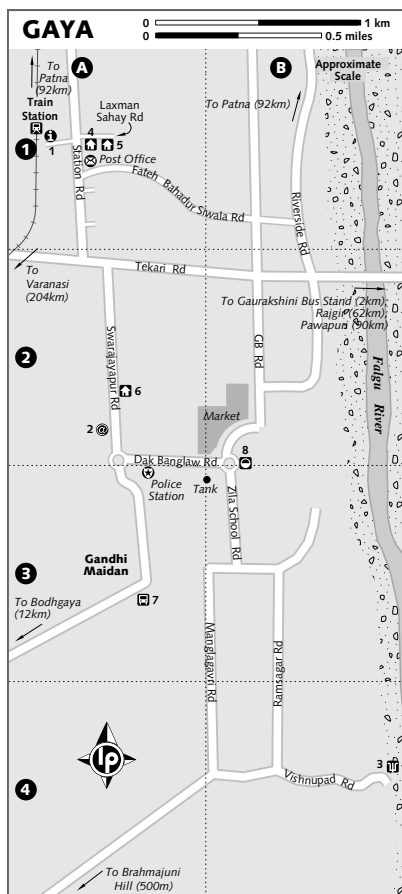
Sleeping & Eating

The main reason to stay overnight in Gaya is if you arrive late or have an early departure, otherwise Bodhgaya is a better place to stay.

Hotel Akash (📞 2222205; Laxman Sahay Rd; s/d Rs 175/250) Standing out among the concrete clone hotels down the lane opposite the station, this is the pick of the budget places. The turquoise timber façade gives way to an Islamic-inspired inner courtyard. Basic rooms are reasonably clean with TV and there's a relaxing open-air area upstairs.

Hotel Vishnu International (📞 2431146; Swarajapur Rd; s Rs 250, d Rs 350-600, with AC Rs 1000; 🍴) With a castle-like façade, this reasonably new hotel is the best value in town. Clean, well kept, and most rooms have TV and hot water.

Ajatsatru Hotel (📞 2434584; Station Rd; d Rs 375, d with AC Rs 800; 🍴) Directly opposite the station, rooms here vary a lot and are comparatively overpriced but, the AC multicuisine restaurant (mains Rs 20 to 80), open 7am to 11.30pm, is a good place for a bite while waiting for a train.



Getting There & Away

Buses to Patna (Rs 50, three hours, hourly) and Ranchi (Rs 101, seven hours, hourly) leave from the Gandhi Maidan bus stand. Some buses to Patna also leave from a stand next to the train station. Buses to Rajgir (Rs 35, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes) use the Gaurakshini bus stand, across the river.

Gaya is on the Delhi–Kolkata railway line with regular trains to Delhi (sleeper/3AC Rs 319/899, 16 hours) and Kolkata (Rs 183/515, eight hours), and less frequent services to Varanasi (Rs 110/310, four hours). There are four daily trains to Patna (Rs 101/188, two hours).

At the train station you'll be besieged by autorickshaw drivers assuming you're heading to Bodhgaya. It should cost Rs 80, or you

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can take a cycle-rickshaw to Kacheri stand and a crowded shared autorickshaw (Rs 8) from there.

Getting Around

From the train station, a cycle-rickshaw should cost Rs 12 to the Kacheri autorickshaw stand, Rs 15 to Gandhi Maidan or Gaurakshini bus stands, and Rs 20 to the Vishnupad Temple.

RAJGIR

☎ 06112 / pop 33,691

Set among bushland and surrounded by five rocky hills, each lined with vestiges of ancient cyclopean walls, is the ancient capital of the Magadha kingdom, known today as Rajgir. Thanks to both Buddha and Mahavira spending some serious time here, Rajgir is an important pilgrimage site for Buddhists and Jains. A mention in the Mahabharata also ensures that Rajgir has a good supply of Hindu pilgrims who come to bathe in the hot springs at the Lakshmi Narayan Temple.

For travellers, a couple of days spent exploring the many historic Buddhist sites around Rajgir and the ancient university site of Nalanda, 12km south of town, provides the perfect complement to Bodhgaya, 80km away.

Rajgir Mahotsava (24 to 26 October) is the town's three-day cultural festival featuring Indian classical and folk music and dance.

Information

The dusty centre of this small town lies 500m east of the main road, on which you'll find the train station, bus stand and a number of hotels. There's a BSTDC tourist office at the Hotel Gautam Vihar, about 1km south of the

AJATASATRU: THE UNBORN ENEMY

According to legend, in the 6th century BC Bimbisara, the elderly ruler of the Magadha kingdom, was frustrated that he and his wife, Vaidehi, had not yet produced an heir. He called on a fortune teller, who told him that there was an old hermit three years from death in the distant hills and when the hermit passed, his spirit would impregnate Vaidehi. Impatient, Bimbisara ordered the hermit killed and soon Vaidehi was expecting.

However, the news was not all good for Bimbisara, as the hermit had cursed the future heir in his last breath. This led to numerous bad omens and prophecies that Bimbisara's heir would grow to murder him and usurp his crown. Bimbisara grew fearful and named his son Ajatasatru, which directly translates to 'He whose enemy is not born'.

It's thought that Bimbisara tried to have Ajatasatru killed on a few occasions, but the boy always eluded death and eventually grew up to seize the crown and starve his father to death in prison.

train station. There's a **State Bank of India ATM** (Bank Rd) about 200m west of the bus stand, but no foreign-exchange facilities.

Sights & Activities

Take the wobbly single-person **chairlift** (return Rs 30; ☎ 8.15am-1pm & 2-5pm) to the top of Ratnagiri Hill, about 5km south of town, to visit the huge 40m-high whitewashed **Vishwashanti Stupa**, built by Japanese Buddhists. Recesses in the stupa feature gilded statues of Buddha in the four stages of his life – birth, enlightenment, preaching and death. There's also a Japanese Monastery and the expansive views reveal some of the 26 Jain shrines dotting the distant hilltops. If you walk back down, you can stop to detour at **Griddhakuta** (Vulture's Peak) where Buddha preached to his disciples and the remains of a stupa can be seen.

Spread around the town are relics of the ancient city, caves and places associated with Ajatasatru and his father Bimbisara, who he imprisoned and starved to death here in the 5th century BC (see the boxed text, above). Within the rowdy and very pink **Lakshmi Narayan Temple complex**, about 2km south of town, Hindu pilgrims are drawn to the health benefits of the hot springs, where the water is piped from underground. Brahmakund, the hottest spring, is a scalding 45°C. Temple 'priests' will show you around, pour hot water on you and ask for excessive donations.

The easiest way to see Rajgir's scattered sites is to rent a tonga – a cushioned and covered horse-drawn cart. This should cost about Rs 150 for a half-day.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a few budget hotels around the bus station and east along Dharamsala Rd in

the town centre, though none are very good. Midrange and top-end choices are spread out in the south, just west of the hot springs. High-season rates are given below, but up to 50% discount applies out of season or if occupancy is low.

Hotel Gautam Vihar (☎ 255273; Nalanda Rd; dm Rs 75, d Rs 450, d with AC Rs 700; 🏠) One of three Bihar Tourism hotels in town, this is well located between the bus and train stations, and the spacious, clean rooms have lounge chairs, TV and hot water. Out in the garden in a hexagonal hut is a decent restaurant.

Hotel Siddharth (☎ 255616; s/d Rs 450/650, d with AC Rs 750; 🏠) A bit of a hike south of the bus and train stations and near the hot springs, Siddharth doesn't look much from the outside but has a pleasant walled courtyard, good-sized rooms and a pleasant restaurant.

our pick Centaur Hokke Hotel (☎ 255245; centaur@dtc.vsnl.net.in; s/d Rs 5200/6200; 🏠) Fronted by a towering cylindrical Buddhist prayer hall and surrounded by lovely manicured gardens, this is one of Bihar's most unique sleeping experiences. Twenty of the 26 rooms are in true Japanese form, complete with tatami mats instead of beds, teak furniture and Eastern décor. Soak in the Japanese bathhouse and meditate in the prayer hall. It's mighty popular with tour groups.

Green Restaurant (mains Rs 20-60) Opposite the temple complex and hot springs just south of town, this simple restaurant offers some of the best nonveg Indian meals in town.

Lotus Restaurant (meals Rs US\$1-12; 🏠) At the Hokke Hotel, this elegant restaurant with high-backed chairs and long tables is part Japanese, part Indian. The Japanese menu features soba noodles, teriyaki and tempura with authentic flavours and fresh ingredients. No

sushi, sashimi or sake, but still a memorable dining experience.

While the beloved puff-pastry sweet known as *khaja* is sold throughout Bihar, its origins lay in Silao, just north of Rajgir. This tiny village is still said to be home to the finest *khaja* in all the land – the wasps certainly love it.

Getting There & Around

Regular buses run to Gaya (Rs 45, 2½ hours) and Patna (Rs 60, three hours) from the bus stand on the Nalanda road. Ridiculously crowded shared jeeps shuttle between Rajgir and Nalanda (Rs 8). The best way to get to Patna is on one of two daily trains that originate in Rajgir (2nd class Rs 36, 2½ hours, 8.10am and 3.15pm), with stops at Nalanda (Rs 18, 15 minutes) and Pawapuri (Rs 20, 25 minutes).

AROUND RAJGIR

Nalanda

☎ 061194

Founded in the 5th century AD, Nalanda was one of the ancient world's great universities and an important Buddhist centre. When Chinese scholar and traveller Xuan Zang visited some time between AD 685 and 762, 10,000 monks and students resided here and studied theology, astronomy, metaphysics, medicine and philosophy. Nalanda's three libraries were so extensive they burnt for six months when Afghans sacked the university in the 12th century.

Allow an hour or two for wandering the extensive university's **ruins** (Indian/foreigner Rs 5/100; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) – they're peaceful and well maintained with a park-like atmosphere of clipped lawns, perfumed with the scent of roses and shrubs. Guides outside the gates clamour to offer their services for Rs 100 an hour and while a good guide may help bring the ruins to life, the printed guidebooks (Rs 40) are just as good.

The red-brick ruins comprise a main rectangle of nine monasteries and four main temple sites at the back. Most impressive is the **Great Stupa**, with steps, terraces and a few intact votive stupas around it, and the monks' chambers. Although you can climb up the steps of monastery No 1 for a view over the complex, the crumbling steps up the Great Stupa are now understandably out of bounds.

Across the road and entered separately is the **archaeological museum** (admission Rs 2; ☎ 10am-

5pm Sat-Thu), a small but fascinating museum housing the Nalanda University seal and a host of sculptures and bronzes unearthed from Nalanda and Rajgir. Along with the many Buddha figures and Picasso-like 9th-century *Kirtimukha*, look out for the bizarre many-spouted pot.

About 2km further on from the ruins is the huge **Xuan Zang Memorial Hall** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm), built by the Chinese as a peace pagoda in honour of the famous Chinese traveller who studied and taught for some years at Nalanda. Modern-day backpackers will appreciate the statue of Xuan Zang at the front. A museum and exhibit devoted to Xuan Zang was due to open at the time of writing.

Regular shared jeeps run between Rajgir and Nalanda village (Rs 8), and from there you can take a shared tonga (Rs 10) or cycle-rickshaw (Rs 20) the final 3km to the site.

Pawapuri

Pawapuri is a major Jain pilgrimage centre, due to Mahavira, the final *tirthankar* and founder of Jainism, dying and being cremated here in about 500 BC. It is said the demand for his sacred ashes was so great that copious amounts of soil were removed around his funeral pyre, creating the massive lotus-filled tank here today. Seemingly floating in the middle of the tank is the ornate, marble temple of **Jalmandir**.

JHARKHAND

One of three new states created in India in 2000, Jharkhand was hewn out of neighbouring Bihar to meet the growing demands of the Adivasi (tribal) population. Despite the fledgling state having a jaw-dropping 40% of the country's mineral wealth (mainly coal, copper and iron ore), rich forests, several major industrial centres and the healthy budget of a newly formed state, it still suffers thanks to the crippling demands of tribal populations, poverty, corruption, and outbursts of Maoist and Naxalite violence. For travellers, Jharkhand's prime attractions are its national parks, a few waterfalls around the capital Ranchi and the chance to explore a tourist-free northern India – with Jharkhand off most visitors' radars, you may well be the only foreigner in the state.

RANCHI

☎ 0651 / pop 846,454

Jharkhand's capital, Ranchi was once the summer capital of Bihar under the British – set on a plateau at about 700m, it's marginally cooler than the plains. For travellers there's not a lot of interest in the city and it's not really on the way to anywhere – the only real reason for landing here is to transit to Betla National Park, or to tour the surrounding waterfalls.

There's a **tourist office** (☎ 2310230; 5 Main Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) at the Birsa Vihar tourist complex, and a HDFC ATM across the road. The **State Bank of India** (Main Rd; ☎ 10am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) changes cash and travellers cheques. Check email at the **i-way Internet Café** (Station Rd; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 9am-9pm) next to Hotel Embassy.

Suhana Tour and Travels (☎ 3093808; Gurunanak Market, Station Rd) is a reliable travel agency that can organise day trips to local waterfalls (Rs 1200), two- or three-day trips to Betla National Park (from Rs 2500) and other transport ticketing.

Sights & Activities

If you're here for a day, visit the Hindu **Jagannath Temple**, a small version of the great Jagannath Mandir at Puri. It's 6km southwest of town (Rs 50 by autorickshaw). The **Tribal Research Institute Museum** (☎ 2541824; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is also worth a visit to delve into the history of Jharkhand's many tribal groups, including the Asurs, Mundas and Gonds.

There are several pretty waterfalls that can be visited on day trips from Ranchi. The most spectacular, especially from November to February, are the **Hundru Falls**, 45km northeast of the city.

Sleeping & Eating

Dusty Station Rd, running between the train and bus stations, is lined with hotels of varying quality, though few are interested in checking in foreigners. Other hotels, restaurants and banks can be found on the seemingly endless Main Rd, running at right angles to Station Rd.

Hotel Birsa Vihar (☎ 2331828; Main Rd; dm/d Rs 70/300, d with AC Rs 500; ☎) Jharkhand Tourism's hotel is welcoming and cheap enough – and conveniently within the tourist complex – but it's a bit gloomy and the rooms are sadly grubby. All private rooms have geysers that sometimes work, and TVs that can distract you from the walls.

Hotel Embassy (☎ 2460813; Station Rd; s/d Rs 300/400, with AC Rs 650/850; ☎) Staff are a little indifferent, but this is one of the few budget places along here to accept foreigners and the comfortable AC rooms are refreshingly contemporary and decently clean.

BNR Guesthouse-Southeastern Railway (☎ 2460584; Station Rd; s/d Rs 438/599, with AC from Rs 706/866; ☎) Almost opposite the train station, this red-tiled terracotta-roofed Raj relic is a surprisingly pleasant haven. The gardens are unkempt and the rooms a little musty but they have an undeniable charm and travellers are welcomed.

Hotel Capitol Hill (☎ 2331330; www.hotelcapitolhill.com; Main Rd; s/d Rs 2800/3400; ☎) Without doubt Ranchi's top hotel, this is in the new Capitol Hill shopping complex. The ultramodern 3rd-floor lobby with cream leather chairs gives way to equally modern rooms with a Scandinavian touch. The stylish restaurant and bar are also Ranchi's best.

Planet Masala (☎ 3291765; 56C Main Rd; mains Rs 30-80) Spotless and with a funky interior – high ceilings and a glassed-in upper level – this modern veg café is a great escape from Main Rd. Along with a full menu of dosas, thalis, veg pizzas and Chinese dishes, there's a great range of coffee, sundaes and chocolate brownies.

The Nook (☎ 2460128; Station Rd; mains Rs 45-95) The best restaurant in the train station area, the dining room in Hotel Kwaliti Inns is bright and comfortable, and the broad menu features tasty veg and nonveg food from roast chicken and prawn curry to Kashmiri and tandoori dishes, washed down with a cold beer.

Getting There & Away

Air Deccan has the cheapest fares, flying daily between Ranchi and Kolkata (one hour), and four times a week to Patna (50 minutes) and Delhi (three hours). **Indian Airlines** (☎ 2203042; Main Rd) has flights to Delhi (US\$135) and Kolkata (US\$82).

Buses to Gaya (Rs 101, six hours, hourly) and Patna (Rs 170, nine hours) leave from the main bus stand from 6.30am, while buses to Daltonganj (for Betla) leave from the Ratu Rd bus stand (Rs 85, six hours, hourly). From the Birsa Vihar tourist complex on Main Rd there are two deluxe buses to Patna at 8am (Rs 170, eight to nine hours) and 8pm (Rs 200).

There are three daily trains to Patna (sleeper/3AC Rs 218/612, 10 to 14 hours,

6.15am, 7.15pm and 10.15pm) and two to Gaya (sleeper/chair Rs 133/291, seven hours, 6.15am and 7.15pm). To Kolkata you can take the 1.45pm *Shatabdi Express* (chair/executive Rs 645/1220, 7½ hours) or the overnight *Howrah-Hatia Express* (sleeper/3AC Rs 170/480).

BETLA (PALAMAU) NATIONAL PARK

Home to the world's first tiger census in 1932 and now part of Project Tiger, this undisputed natural gem of the state is 140km west of Ranchi and is one of the best places in India to see wild elephants, though tiger sightings are comparatively rare. The entire Palamau Sanctuary covers around 1026 sq km, while the core area of 232 sq km was declared as Betla National Park in 1989. Pure stands of sal forest, rich evergreens, teak trees and bamboo thickets are home to some 37 tigers, 62 leopards, 210 elephants and 249 bison. There are several rickety observation towers for the brave to climb and lay low, while watching wildlife in silence. Living among the animals are eight local tribes spread across 200 small villages. This area was also the seat of power in the Chero dynasty and two of its 16th-century forts still exist in the jungle.

While open year-round, the best time to visit the park (☎ 06562-222650; admission per vehicle Rs 80, camera/video Rs 50/300; 🕒 5am-7pm) is October through April. If you can stand the heat, May is a prime time for tiger-spotting as the forest cover is reduced and the animals venture out in search of waterholes. **Jeep safaris** (per hr about Rs 200) can be arranged privately at the park gate. You must also hire a local guide (per hour Rs 20) to bring in your vehicle.

The park offers **elephant safaris** (per hr up to 4 people Rs 100) that take you off the vehicle tracks and into the jungle where you get an unparalleled look at the park's flora and fauna.

The government-run **Van Vihar tourist complex** (☎ 06567-226513; d Rs 400, with AC Rs 700; 🚻) is the best accommodation around the park entrance and it's the only option open all year. Spacious rooms are clean, bright and look onto the gardens – some have balconies. Jharkhand Tourism also runs the basic **Tourist House** (dm Rs 100).

The nearest town to the park entrance is Daltonganj, 25km away. There are five daily

buses between Betla and Daltonganj (Rs 14, one hour), or you can arrange a taxi for around Rs 200. Daltonganj is connected to Ranchi by bus (Rs 85, six hours, hourly). Alternatively, organise a tour through a Ranchi travel agency that will take you directly to the park. Suhana Tour and Travels (see opposite) has two-day trips for Rs 2500 per person, including transport, accommodation and safari, or longer trips on demand. This isn't a bad option considering the safety issue in this isolated and lawless part of the state. In any case, it's imperative you call the park for security advice before leaving. For more information on getting the latest security updates, see p551.

PARASNATH

☎ 06532

Parasnath, a dusty town in eastern Jharkhand, is the railhead for **Sikayi**, the major Jain pilgrimage centre in east India. The site and its many temples blanket the top of **Parasnath Hill** – Jharkhand's highest point. At the summit (1366m), where the Parasnath Temple now stands, 23 of the 24 Jain *tirthankars* reached salvation, including Parasnath at the age of 100. Given the remote location you'd have to have a serious interest in Jainism to warrant a special trip.

Starting from the serene and leaf-laden town of Madhuban, 25km northeast of Parasnath, the 6km walk up through lush forest is as rewarding as the grand view from the top.

If you're interested in spending the night, there are some *dharamsalas* (pilgrims' guest-houses), including the **Dak Bungalow** (admission by donation), a rudimentary place where you'll get a mattress on the floor. There's also a **tourist lodge** (☎ 0658-232378; s/d Rs 80/120) in Madhuban.

A handful of trains run from Gaya (2nd class/chair Rs 46/160, three hours) and Kolkata (sleeper/3AC Rs 130/365, six hours) to Parasnath daily, and there's a morning bus to Ranchi (Rs 85, 4½ hours). Regular minibuses run from Parasnath's bus stand to Madhuban (Rs 25).

Naxalite activity has been continuing in this area, so it's vital to get security advice before arriving (see p551).

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