



Bihar & Jharkhand

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Best Places to Eat

- » Bellpepper Restaurant (p512)
- » Chanakya BNR Hotel (p523)
- » Tandoor Hut (p512)
- » Mohammed Restaurant (p520)
- » Takshila (p512)

Best Places to Stay

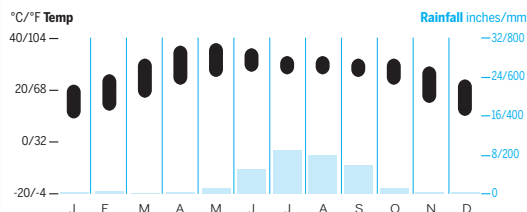
- » Indo Hokke Hotel (p522)
- » Chanakya BNR Hotel (p523)
- » Taj Darbar (p518)
- » Hotel Windsor (p511)

Why Go?

Though long harnessed as pilgrim country for the devout, Bihar and Jharkhand remain pioneer travel territory for the average tourist and are perhaps more representative of traditional India than any other northern states as a result. Outside the big cities most signage is in Hindi and men are more likely to be wearing the kurta and dhoti rather than Western-style shirt and trousers. But the region's spirituality is the big draw. As the birthplace of Buddhism, Bihar holds great significance in India's cultural and religious heritage. Siddhartha Gautama – Buddha – spent much of his life here and attained enlightenment underneath a bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, making it the most important pilgrimage site in the world for Buddhists. Jharkhand's highest point, Parasnath Hill, is notable as the most significant Jain pilgrimage site in north-central India. Together, the states cater to a procession of pilgrims throughout the year.

When to Go

Patna



Feb & Mar Beat the heat: temperatures hover between a pleasant 19°C and 25°C.

Oct & Nov With monsoons in retreat, the region is pleasant and dry as winter sets in.

Nov & Dec Bihar's Sonepur Mela extravaganza puts Pushkar's Camel Fair to shame.

The Flavour Frontier

You're in hearty frontier country. Leading the charge north towards the Himalayas is a vibrant gastronomic medley influenced by Mughals, Afghans, Bengal Nawabs, Persians, Europeans and Buddhist vegetarianism. Look out for *chokha*, spicy mashed potatoes prepared with *panch foron*, a five-seed mix of mustard, anise, fenugreek, carom and onion; and roasted chickpea flour fried in hot sand, known as *sattu*, which boasts a high-carb, energetic kick. *Litti*, balls of spiced *sattu* covered in dough and baked on coals, is ubiquitous on the streets. Bihari kebabs, usually made with mutton splashed with red chillies, cumin, coriander, raw papaya, cinnamon, garlic and ginger, are a delight if you can find them, and are sometimes wrapped inside *paratha* and served as rolls. Sweet teeth in Bihar and Jharkhand are satiated with dry sweets, like the strange but satisfying *tilkut*, pounded sesame seed cookies made with jaggery batter or melted sugar.

DON'T MISS

Buddhist pilgrims from all over the world flock to Bihar's **Mahabodhi Temple** in Bodhgaya and rightfully so: it is here that Prince Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment beneath a bodhi tree and became Buddha. The temple complex was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2002. Other treats in the region include the Jain Holy Ground at **Parasnath Hill**, the elephant-rich **Betla National Park** and the ancient ruins in and around **Rajgir**.

Top Bihar & Jharkhand Festivals

- » Pataliputra Mahotsava (Mar, Patna, p511) Patna celebrates its historic past with parades, sports, dancing and music.
- » Rajgir Mahotsava (Oct, Rajgir, p521) A classical performing arts festival with folk dances, devotional songs and instrumental music.
- » Chhath Festival (Oct/Nov, Bihar and Jharkhand) People line the banks of rivers and water bodies to honour Surya, the Sun God. At sunset on the sixth day after Diwali, married women, having fasted for 36 hours, immerse themselves in the water and offer fruits and flowers to the deity.
- » Sonapur Mela (Nov/Dec, Sonapur, p514) With 700,000 attendees and countless thousands of animals taking part, this three-week festival is four times the size of Pushkar's Camel Fair.

MAIN POINTS OF ENTRY

Most travellers arrive at Patna's Jaiprakash Narayan International Airport, Ranchi's Birsa Munda Airport or by train into Patna (PNBE) or Ranchi junctions (RNC).

Fast Facts

- » Population: 103.8 million (Bihar), 33 million (Jharkhand)
- » Area: 99,200 sq km (Bihar), 74,677 sq km (Jharkhand)
- » Capital: Patna (Bihar), Ranchi (Jharkhand)
- » Language: Hindi
- » Sleeping prices: \$ below ₹800, \$\$ ₹800 to ₹1500, \$\$\$ above ₹1500

Top Tip

Steer clear of this region during monsoon season (June to September) – Bihar is India's most flood-prone state.

Resources

- » Tourism Bihar (www.tourismbihar.org) is the official department of tourism site of Bihar.
- » Jharkhand Tourism (www.jharkhandtourism.in) is the official department of tourism site of Jharkhand.



Bihar & Jharkhand Highlights

- 1 Witness the spiritual dawn spectacle at the **Mahabodhi Temple** (p516) in Bodhgaya
- 2 Take a walking tour through the Buddhist world at **Bodhgaya's** numerous temples and monasteries (p517)
- 3 Join the Jain pilgrimage to the 1366m-high **Parasnath Hill** (p524)
- 4 Visit the ancient university at **Nalanda** (p522) and imagine what life was like for its 10,000 pupils from all over Asia
- 5 Journey to the lost capital of Magadha through the ruins, temples and monuments around **Rajgir** (p521)
- 6 Trade noise pollution for silent lucidity at the stunning **Vishwashanti Stupa** (p521) in Rajgir
- 7 Prowl the forested **Betla (Palamau) National Park** (p525) on the back of an elephant in search of elusive tigers
- 8 Indulge in the memorable frontier cuisine of **Patna's** many excellent restaurants (p512)

History

Prince Siddhartha Gautama arrived in Bihar during the 6th century BC and spent many years here before leaving enlightened as Buddha. The life of Mahavira, a contemporary of Buddha and the founder of Jainism, was born in Bihar and attained Nirvana there before his death near Nalanda at the age of 72. In the 4th century BC, after Chandragupta Maurya conquered the Magadha kingdom and its capital Pataliputra (now Patna), he expanded into the Indus Valley and created the first great Indian empire. His grandson and successor, Ashoka, ruled the Mauryan empire from Pataliputra, which was one of the largest cities in the world at that time. Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism (see p1087), erecting 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 (p516) and the lion-topped pillar at Vaishali (p514).

Bihar continued to be coveted by a succession of major empires until the Magadha dynasty rose to glory again during the reign of the Guptas (7th and 8th centuries AD).

With the decline of the Mughal empire, Bihar came under the control of Bengal until 1912, when a separate state was formed. Part of this state later became Orissa and, more recently in 2000, Jharkhand.

i Information

State tourism offices exist in every major town but do little besides handing out leaflets – if that.

BIHAR

Patna

☎0612 / POP 1,285,470

Bihar's busy capital sprawls out over the south bank of the polluted Ganges, just east of the river's confluence with three major tributaries. Unlike Varanasi, there's nothing for the traveller along the river itself and Patna has only a handful of worthwhile sights. Otherwise it's a chaotic eyesore that would be an odd place to voluntarily spend any considerable length of time save one crucial caveat: Patna is home to Bihar and Jharkhand's best eats. Still, most tourists get to know it only as a major transport hub and

a springboard for visiting the Buddhist sites of Vaishali and Kesariya.

Patna was once a powerful city. Early in the 5th century BC, Ajatasatru shifted the capital of his 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 1000 years.

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. The 5.7km-long Mahatma Gandhi Setu, the longest single river bridge in the world, connects Patna with Hajipur.

i Sights & Activities



Patna Museum

MUSEUM

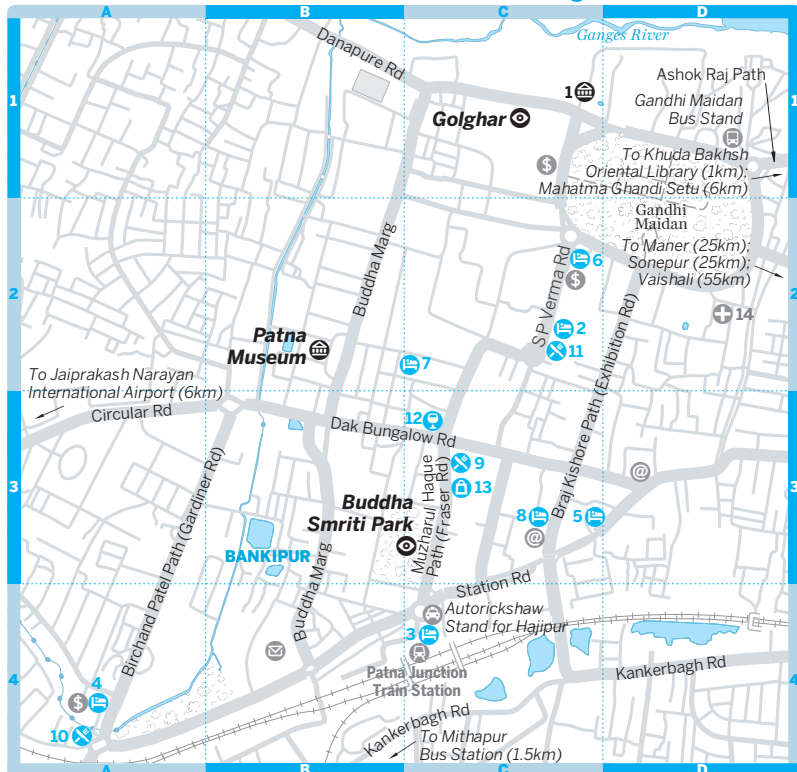
(Buddha Marg; Indian/foreigner ₹10/250;

☎10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) Behind its impressive but decaying exterior, this museum houses a splendid collection of Mauryan and Gupta stone sculptures. There's the usual collection of period weapons, including Humayun's dagger, and a gallery of wonderful Rajasthani



STAYING SAFE IN BIHAR & JHARKHAND

Bihar and Jharkhand have a deserved reputation for lawlessness throughout India. Conditions have improved under the Nitish Kumar government, but dacoit (bandit) activity, such as holding up cars, buses and trains, is still a possibility and Maoist and Naxalite bombings are not uncommon. Although foreign and domestic tourists are not specific targets, it's a good idea to split up your valuables on long journeys and avoid night travel where possible, especially by road. Women should take extra precaution throughout the state. In Patna, security has improved, but do take care at night, especially if alone. For more info, check the English-language newspapers *Bihar Times* (www.bihartimes.com), *Patna Daily* (www.patnadaily.com) and *Ranchi Express* (ranchiexpress.com) before arrival.



miniatures. In another gallery is a motley collection of stuffed animals, including tigers, a large gharial (a type of crocodile), a bizarre three-eared and eight-legged goat kid, and a wombat. Upstairs in a locked gallery (for an extra ₹500) you can glimpse a tiny casket that's believed to contain some of Buddha's ashes that were retrieved from Vaishali (p514).



Buddha Smriti Park

PARK

This new 9-hectare park on Fraser Rd, inaugurated by the Dalai Lama in 2010, is notable for its massive sandblasted charcoal stupa, which houses a unique bulletproof chamber inside; and sapling plantings from both the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya and Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. There is also a colour-coordinated museum and meditation centre, which makes for a striking architectural panorama. Judging by appearances, it looks to be far more interesting and welcoming than Gandhi Maidan.

FREE Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library

MUSEUM

(Ashok Raj Path; ☎9.30am-5pm Sat-Thu) This fascinating library, founded in 1900, contains a renowned collection of Arabic and Persian manuscripts, Mughal and Rajput paintings, and even the Quran inscribed in a book just 25mm wide. A significant exhibit is Nadir Shah's sword – perhaps this was the one he raised at Delhi's Sunehri Mosque in 1739 to order the massacre of the city's residents.



Golghar

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Danapure Rd; ☎24hr) For a dome with a view, climb this MC Escher-esque landmark. The British army built this massive, bulbous beehive of a granary in 1786, hoping to avoid a repeat of the 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

Patna

📍 Top Sights

Buddha Smriti Park.....	C3
Golghar.....	C1
Patna Museum.....	B2

📍 Sights

1 Gandhi Museum.....	C1
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🛏 Sleeping

2 Garden Court Club.....	C2
3 Hotel City Centre.....	C4
4 Hotel Kautilya Vihar.....	A4
5 Hotel Maharaja Inn.....	C3
6 Hotel Maurya Patna.....	C2
7 Hotel President.....	C2
8 Hotel Windsor.....	C3

🍴 Eating

9 Anarkali.....	C3
Bellpepper Restaurant.....	(see 8)
Bollywood Treats.....	(see 6)
10 Takshila.....	A4
11 Tandoor Hut.....	C2

🍷 Drinking

12 Elevens.....	C3
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🛍 Shopping

13 Ajanta.....	C3
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Information

BSTDC Tourist Office.....	(see 10)
14 Ruban Memorial Hospital & Ratan Stone Clinic.....	D2

the city and Ganges. Golghar is a short walk west of **Gandhi Maidan**, a large, messy park with a couple of sights that's located south of the river.

Har Mandir Takht

SIKH TEMPLE

Behind a grand gate and sheltered from the mayhem of Patna's Chowk area lies this important Sikh shrine. Its miniature marble domes, sweeping staircases and fine latticework mark the spot where Guru Gobind Singh, last of the 10 Sikh gurus, was born in 1666. It's 11km east of Gandhi Maidan.

FREE

Qila House (Jalan Museum)

MUSEUM

(📍2641121; Jalan Ave; 🕒by appointment only) This intriguing private museum overflows with antiques ranging from elaborate Mughal-period silverware and weaponry to the wooden bed of Napoleon III. It is located on the banks of the Ganges, 12km east of Ghandi Maiden.

FREE

Gandhi Museum

MUSEUM

(Danapure Rd; 🕒10am-6pm Sun-Fri) Contains a pictorial history of Mahatma Gandhi's life, plus some of his meagre belongings.



Festivals & Events

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



Sleeping

Most accommodation choices are around Fraser and Station Rds. Rooms below ₹1000 have an additional 5% tax, those above, 10%.



Hotel Windsor

HOTEL \$\$

(📍2203250; www.hotelwindsorpatna.com; Exhibition Rd; s/d ₹1200/1400; 📞) This is Patna's best midrange hotel, with well-designed rooms, spotless bathrooms, cheery and prompt service, a superb restaurant and internet centre. With a bar it'd be perfect.

Garden Court Club

HOTEL \$

(📍3202279; www.gardencourtclub.com; SP Verma Rd; s/d ₹500/600, with AC from ₹800/1000; 📞) Take the lift within a small shopping complex up to the intimate 13-room Garden Court Club. Rooms differ: some have views, some have squat toilets. The underused faux-forest open-air rooftop restaurant is a pleasant retreat from street level, though there *is* a pastry shop down there, which only sweetens the deal.

Hotel City Centre

HOTEL \$

(📍2308686; hotelcitycentrepatna@rediffmail.com; Station Rd; s/d ₹600/800, with AC ₹1050/1250; 📞) You can't miss this modern glass tower hotel as you exit the train station. Only one year old, its good-value rooms are still in great shape (non-AC rooms have squat toilets) and it's perfect for a comfortable transit overnighter.

Hotel Maurya Patna

HOTEL \$\$\$

(📍2203040; www.maurya.com; South Gandhi Maidan; s ₹8000, s/d incl airport transfer & breakfast ₹9000/10000; 📞) Fine appointments and luxurious surroundings distinguish Patna's top business hotel. The large gardens host a tempting pool and there are a few nice

restaurants (and an underwhelming bar). Rooms are tastefully furnished, centrally air-conditioned and have disobedient wi-fi.

Hotel President

HOTEL \$

(☎2209203; www.hotelpresidentpatna.com; off Fraser Rd; s/d from ₹675/800, with AC ₹1000/1200; 🍷🍷) This family-run hotel is in a relatively quiet location off Fraser Rd and close to Patna Museum. Rooms are simple, clean and good value with TV, seating areas and hot water.

Hotel Kautilya Vihar

HOTEL \$

(☎2225411; bstdc@sancharnet.in; Gardiner Rd; dm ₹100, d ₹600, with AC from ₹800; 🍷) This hotel has typically well-worn rooms and cramped dorms. It lacks atmosphere, but there's a restaurant and eager staff.

Hotel Maharaja Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(☎2321955; Station Rd; s/d ₹900/1100, with AC ₹1150/1450; 🍷) The brightest in a cluster of midrange cheapies has colourful rooms but nothing you'd mention on a postcard.



Eating & Drinking

Animated Fraser Rd is the main shopping street, with a buzz of restaurants and bars.



Bellpepper Restaurant

INDIAN \$\$

(Hotel Windsor, Exhibition Rd; mains ₹100-275; ☺lunch & dinner) The Bellpepper is an intimate, contemporary restaurant popular for its tandoori dishes. The *murg tikka Lababdar* (tandoori chicken basted with garlic, ginger, green chillies, and a pistachio- and cashew-nut paste) is so good Patna's ills will disappear into a flavour cavalcade in your mouth. No booze to wash it down, though. The best meal we had in this region.



Tandoor Hut

INDIAN \$\$

(☎delivery 9304871717; SP Verma Rd; mains ₹60-160; ☺lunch & dinner) It's impossible to saunter past the delicious dangling kebabs in the display of this take away – only stand without throwing your rupees across the counter. The chicken

tikka and chicken *reshmi* kebabs (feeds two) are both extraordinary, but we can't imagine anything not being wonderful – and we didn't even make it to the curries or Chinese food.

TOP CHOICE Takshila

INDIAN \$\$\$

(Hotel Chanayka; Birchand Patel Marg; mains ₹145-375; ☺lunch & dinner) Exuding the ambience of the North-West Frontier with its solid furniture, exposed brick decor and copper flatware, the upscale Takshila is a meat-heavy Mughlai, Afghan and tandoori gastrodream. Though the meat is every bit as good for half the price at Tandoor Hut, here you pay for the ambience and service.

Elevens

LOUNGE

(Dumraow Kothi, Fraser Rd; ☺lunch & dinner) If you've been travelling any length of time in Bihar, the cocktails (₹165 to ₹220) at Patna's first stand alone lounge go down like Gatorade at halftime – even if they do put olives in the watermelon martinis. It's owned by Indian cricketer Kapil Dev, whose adjacent restaurant (mains ₹145 to ₹375, order from the bar) features an atypical menu of recipes collected from his sporting travels throughout Asia.

Bollywood Treats

INDIAN \$\$

(Maurya Patna Hotel Arcade; mains ₹70-160; ☺from 1pm) This spotless, modern self-service cafe dishes out dosas, Chinese stir-fries, shwarma, chicken hot dogs, decent pizza and tempting brownies to Patna's blossoming middle class in self-proclaimed 'American style'. Well, there is a Baskin-Robbins ice cream stand just outside its doors.

Anarkali

INDIAN \$\$

(Mamta Hotel, cnr Fraser & Dak Bungalow Rds; mains ₹60-175) Great food. Cold beer. The chicken tikka butter masala hurts so good.



Shopping

Ajanta

HANDICRAFTS

(Hotel Satka Arcade, Fraser Rd; ☺10.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat) Come here for Patna's best selection

MITHILA PAINTINGS

Bihar's unique and most famous folk art is its Mithila (or Madhubani) paintings. Traditionally, women from Madhubani and surrounding villages started creating strong line drawings on the walls of their homes from the first day of their marriage. Using pigments from spices, minerals, charcoal and vegetable matter, they 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 professionally produced on paper, canvas and silk and are for sale. Original wall paintings can still be seen in homes around Madhubani, 160km northeast of Patna.

of Mithila paintings (see p512). Although most of the stock on display is bronzes, the owner can show you a wide range of unmounted paintings starting from ₹200 (handmade paper) to ₹1050 (silk).

i Information

Internet Access

Cyber World (Rajendra Path; per hr ₹20; ☎9.30am-9pm)

Rendezvous Cyber Cafe (Hotel Windsor, Exhibition Rd; per hr ₹25; ☎10am-8pm)

Medical Services

Ruban Memorial Hospital & Ratan Stone Clinic (Gandhi Maidan; ☎24hr) Emergency room, clinic and pharmacy.

Money

State Bank of India (Gandhi Maidan) Currency and travellers cheques exchanged.

Thomas Cook (Hotel Maurya Patna Arcade, South Gandhi Maidan) Currency exchange and travel agency.

Post

Post office (Buddha Marg)

Tourist Information

BSTDC tourist office (☎2225411; bstdc@sancharnet.in; Hotel Kautilya Vihar, Gardiner Rd; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Limited information.

Travel Agencies

Thomas Cook (☎2221699; www.thomascook.in; Hotel Maurya Patna Arcade, South Gandhi Maidan; ☎9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Helpful for booking airline tickets, car rental and chauffeur arrangements.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Patna's Jaiprakash Narayan International Airport is 8km from the city centre. **Air India** (☎2223199; Patna airport) and **GoAir** (☎2227184; Patna airport) fly daily to Delhi. **Kingfisher Red** (☎1800 1800101; Patna airport) and **Jet Airways** (☎2223045; Patna airport) fly daily to Delhi and Kolkata. **Indigo** (☎1800 1803838; Patna airport) flies to Kolkata, and to Mumbai and Delhi via Lucknow and Ranchi, respectively.

Bus

The Mithapur bus station occupies a large, dusty space about 1.5km from the train station. Services include buses to Gaya (₹50, three hours, hourly), Ranchi (₹200, eight hours, several between 5pm and 9pm) and Raxaul (₹125, eight hours, 6am, 9.15pm, 9.30pm, 10.30pm and 10.50pm).

From the Gandhi Maidan bus stand, government bus services travel to Ranchi (₹183, 10 hours, 8pm, 9.30pm and 10pm) and Raxaul (₹120, eight hours, 7.15am and 10pm).

Car

Hiring a car and driver is the best way for day trips from Patna. Most hotels and Thomas Cook (p513) can arrange this service, starting from ₹6.5 per kilometre (minimum 200km). Arrange an early start, as few drivers operate after dark.

Train

Patna Junction is a chaotic station, but there's a **foreign-tourist ticket counter** (window 7; ☎8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) at the 1st-floor reservation office, in the right-hand wing of the station. Destinations with regular daily services include:

Kolkata (Howrah station)

(sleeper/3AC/2AC/1AC ₹252/653/881/1467, eight to 13 hours)

Delhi (sleeper/3AC/2AC/1AC

₹359/954/1302/2191, 12 to 28 hours)

Silguri/New Jalpaiguri (for Darjeeling and Sikkim) (sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹212/564/772, 10 to 14 hours)

Varanasi (2nd class/sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹83/150/365/484, five hours, 10.50am, 12.05pm and 2.30pm)

Gaya (sleeper/3AC ₹120/210, 2½ hours, 9.15pm, 9.45pm and 11.30pm)

Ranchi (sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹232/623/851, 10 to 12 hours, 3.25pm and 9.45pm)

There is no direct train to Raxaul, but it's possible to cross the Mahatma Gandhi Setu to Hajipur – you can catch a rickshaw (Rs50) from the stand in front of Hotel City Centre – and catch one of many trains to Muzaffarpur, where you can switch for the 13021 *Mithila Express* to Raxaul (sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹120/238/319, 3¼ hours, 5.15am), but this would only make sense if you were vehemently opposed to the bus.

i Getting Around

The airport is located 7km west of the city centre. Autorickshaws to/from the city cost ₹125, while prepaid taxis start at ₹350.

Shared autorickshaws shuttle between the train station and Gandhi Maidan bus stand (₹3), departing from the backside of the train station. For short trips, cycle-rickshaws are best.

Around Patna

As the sights of Vaishali are well dispersed and transport to both Vaishali and Kesariya sporadic, it is far better to organise a car and driver (see p513) for a longish day.

VAISHALI

📍06225

Most sites in Vaishali, 55km northwest of Patna, surround a large ancient coronation water tank. Dominating the skyline is a gleaming, modern **Japanese Peace Pagoda** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100), while opposite is a small **museum** (📍229404; admission ₹5; 🕒10am-5pm Sat-Thu) presenting clay and terracotta figures plus an intriguing 1st- to 2nd-century AD toilet pan with appropriately sized exit holes. Nearby are the ground-floor remains of a **stupa** that once contained Buddha's ashes, which now reside in Patna Museum (p509).

Three kilometres away in **Basokund**, you'll find the most widely accepted birthplace of Lord Mahavira, the 24th and final Jain *tirthankar* (teacher), one of three debated locations in Bihar. An engraved stone marks the place in a flower-decorated plot.

At a similar distance are the ruins of the **Kolhua Complex** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; 🕒7am-5pm), comprising a hemispherical brick stupa guarded by a lion squatting atop a 2300-year-old Ashoka pillar. The pillar is plain and contains none of the Ashokan edicts usually carved onto these pillars. Nearby are the ruins of smaller stupas and monastic buildings. According to legend, Buddha was given a bowl of honey here by monkeys, who also dug out a rainwater tank for his water supply.

KESARIYA

Rising high out of the earth from where the dying Buddha donated his begging bowl, this **stupa** (🕒24hr) is an enthralling example of how nature reclaimed a deserted monument. Excavated and half revealed from under a grassy and wooded veil is what's likely to be the world's second-tallest (38m) Buddhist stupa dating from the Pala period. Above the 425m-circumference pedestal are five uniquely shaped terraces that form a gargantuan Buddhist tantric mandala. Each terrace has a number of niches containing

mutilated Buddha statues whose heads were lopped off by Muslim invaders.

MANER

Worth visiting 30km west of Patna is **Chhoti Dargah** (🕒24hr), an architecturally elegant three-storey mausoleum fronted by a large tank. The venerable Muslim saint Makhdum Shah Daulat was buried here in 1619 under a canopied tomb. As it is auspicious to be buried close to a saint, several cloth-covered graves in front of the mausoleum keep the saint company. The large body of water is a favourite swimming spot for local children and its steps provide a good laundry site.

Raxaul

📍06255 / POP 41,347

Raxaul is a grim, dirty and horribly congested border town. Most of the goods imported into Nepal pass through it, and its twin Birganj over the border. As you'd guess, it's not a place to linger. If you must spend the night, **Hotel Kaveri** (📍221148; Main Rd; r with/without AC ₹800/500;🍷) is tolerable, with room service and a vague semblance of tourist-friendliness. Restaurants are very scarce, but you can check your email at India's friendliest cyber house, **Soni Cyber Cafe** (Main Rd; per hr ₹25).

The Karai Tala bus stand is 200m down a western side road about 2km south of the border. There are supposedly five daily buses to Patna, times are extremely variable (₹125, six hours, 6am, 9am, 2pm, 9pm and 10pm). The 13022 *Mithila Express* train runs daily to Kolkata (sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹272/735/1088, 18 hours, 10am).

Gaya

📍0631 / POP 383,197

Brash and loud Gaya, 100km south of Patna, is a religious centre for Hindu pilgrims who

WORTH A TRIP**SONEPUR MELA**

According to the Gajendra Moksha legend, Sonapur, 25km north of Patna, is where Vishnu ended the prehistoric battle between the lords of the forest (elephants) and the lords of the water (crocodiles). Each November/December, during the full moon of Kartik Purnima, the three-week **Sonepur Mela** celebrates this infamous tale. During this auspicious time devotees bathe where the Ganges joins with the Gandak and Mehi Rivers while Asia's largest cattle fair takes place nearby at Hathhi Bazaar. More than mere bovines are on sale – Marwari horses, brindled goats, camels, birds and elephants change hands, although trade in the latter is illegal.

CROSSING INTO NEPAL

Border Hours

The border at Raxaul is open from 6am to 10pm.

Foreign Exchange

No banks change money in Raxaul but there are many private money changers on both sides of the border. The State Bank of India in Raxaul has an ATM.

Onward Transport

Catch a cycle-rickshaw (₹20), autorickshaw or tonga (two-wheeled horse or pony carriage) from Raxaul's bus or train station to Birganj, 5km away in Nepal. From Birganj, the most convenient and fastest option is **Jai Mata di Tours & Travels** (☎9308051147; Main Rd, Birganj), which runs 10-seater jeeps to Kathmandu and Pokhara from its office a few hundred metres past the border every morning between 7am and 10am (₹560, six hours). Jeeps leave when full. There are also regular day and night bus departures to Kathmandu (₹350/400, nine hours) and Pokhara (₹350/425, nine hours).

Visas

Nepali 15-, 30- and 90-day visas (US\$25/40/100 and one passport photo) are only available from 6am to 6pm on the Nepal side of the border.

believe temple offerings here protect ones' ancestors and relieve the recently departed from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Foreign tourists believe in making a quick getaway to Bodhgaya, 13km away. If you're stuck, look for pilgrims offering *pinda* (funeral cake) at the ghats along the river.

👁 Sights & Activities

Vishnupad Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

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

Brahmajuni Hill

LANDMARK

One thousand stone steps lead to the top of Brahmajuni Hill, 1km southwest of the Vishnupad Temple, where Buddha is said to have delivered the fire sermon.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

If you arrive late or have an early departure, staying in Gaya might be more convenient than in Bodhgaya.

Hotel Vishnu International

HOTEL \$

(☎2224422; Swarajayapur Rd; s ₹350, d ₹450-750, with AC ₹800-1200; 📞) Funky, with a French castle-like exterior, this is the best-value option in town. There's a friendly front desk and clean, well-kept rooms with high-powered fans, but hot water is only available by the bucket.

Ajatsatru Hotel

INDIAN, CHINESE \$\$

(Station Rd; breakfast ₹35-75, mains ₹35-125) This hotel across from the train station is home to the excellent and friendly multicuisine restaurant, Sujata, that can't be beat while waiting for a train. Bihari sweet shops line either side for dessert.

Hotel Akash

HOTEL \$

(☎2222205; Laxman Sahay Rd; s/d ₹250/300) A decent budget option across from the train station, with threadbare but clean rooms. An air cooler costs an extra ₹150.

Khushi

INDIAN/CHINESE \$

(Swarajayapur Rd; mains ₹40-155) A good selection of Indian and Chinese dishes done quite well, with friendly service and stylish blue uniforms to boot. Near Hotel Vishnu.

📍 Information

There's a **Bihar state tourist office** (☎2223635; 🕒10am-5pm Mon-Sat) and a **State Bank of India ATM** at the train station. Several

SASSARAM

If you're motoring on from Gaya to Varanasi, a short detour to the **Mausoleum of Sher Shah** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100; ☀️dawn-dusk) is worthwhile. Seemingly floating within a large tank, the mausoleum of the historically significant emperor Sher Shah (p1089) is an exercise in architectural restraint. Its beauty lies in an aesthetic use of proportion, from its rounded dome down through a ring of *chhatris* (pavilions or pillar-supported canopies) to its solid pedestal. Very similar in style to Isa Khan's tomb in Delhi (p67), it still bears vestiges of deep-blue Persian tiling. Within is the tomb of Sher Shah, his son and their family. Hasan Shah, father of Sher Shah, has his own less spectacular tomb, minus the watery setting, 200m away.

internet cafes (per hr ₹30) line Swarajayapur Rd near Hotel Vishnu.

i Getting There & Away

Bus

Patna (₹60, three hours, hourly) Buses leave from the Gandhi Maidan bus stand and from a stand next to the train station.

Ranchi (₹120, seven hours, hourly) Buses leave from the Gandhi Maidan bus stand.

Rajgir (₹50, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes) Use the bus stand across the river in Manpur.

Train

Gaya is on the Delhi-Kolkata railway line.

Delhi (3AC/2AC/1AC ₹1155/1555/2610, 11 to 12 hours, 10.39pm) The fastest train to Delhi is the 12301 *Kolkata Rajdhani Express*.

Kolkata (3AC/2AC/1AC ₹710/940/1570, six hours, 4.04am) Catch the 12302 for the most convenient connection to Kolkata.

Varanasi (sleeper/3AC/2AC ₹127/325/441, five hours, 5.10am) The most convenient is the 13009 *Doon Express*.

Patna (AC chair ₹165, 2½ hours, 1.10pm) The 18626 *Rajendranagar Express* is the most convenient of the several daily trains to Patna.

Autorickshaw drivers will make the trip to Bodhgaya for ₹200 but can usually be bargained down to about ₹80.

Bodhgaya

☎️0631 / POP 30.883

This spiritually important town attracts Buddhist pilgrims from around the world who come for prayer, study and meditation. It was here that 2600 years ago Prince Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment beneath a bodhi tree and became Buddha. A beautiful temple in a garden setting marks the spot and a descendant of that original bodhi tree flourishes here, its roots

embedded in the same soil as its celebrated ancestor.

Many monasteries and temples dot the bucolic landscape, built in their national style by foreign Buddhist communities. But don't expect a tranquil monastic retreat – the town is firmly planted on the non-religious tourism map as well, and with that has come the usual invasion of tourist paraphernalia, souvenir stalls and a serious rubbish problem. Conversely, Bodhgaya has the best range of accommodation in Bihar and offers the most traveller camaraderie of anywhere in Bihar and Jharkhand.

The best time to visit is October to March when Tibetan pilgrims come down from McLeod Ganj in Dharamsala. The high season is from December to January, which is also when the Dalai Lama often visits.

👁️ Sights & Activities



Mahabodhi Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

(camera/video ₹20/300; ☀️4am-9pm) The magnificent Unesco World Heritage-listed Mahabodhi Temple, where Buddha attained enlightenment and formulated his philosophy of life, forms the spiritual heart of Bodhgaya.

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 several major restorations, the last in 1882. Topped by a 50m pyramidal spire, the ornate structure houses a 10th-century, 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.

Pilgrims and visitors from all walks of life and religions come to worship or just

soak up the ambience of this sacred place. There's a well-manicured **Meditation Park** (admission ₹25 5-10am & 5-9pm, ₹20 10am-5pm) for those seeking extra solitude within the temple grounds. An enthralling way to start or finish the day is to stroll around the perimeter of the temple compound and watch a sea of maroon and yellow dip and rise as monks perform endless prostrations on their prayer boards.

Monasteries & Temples MONASTERIES, TEMPLES One of Bodhgaya's great joys is its collection of monasteries, each offering visitors a unique opportunity to peek into different Buddhist cultures and compare architectural styles. For example, the **Indosan Nipponji Temple** (☀5am-noon & 2-6pm) is an exercise in quiet Japanese understatement compared to the richly presented **Bhutanese Monastery** nearby. The most impressive is the newer **Tergar Monastery** of the Karmapa (Black Hat sect), a glory of Tibetan decorative arts that will leave you slack-jawed as you enter. A none-too-distant runner-up is the impressive **Thai Monastery**, a brightly coloured *wat* with gold leaf shimmering from its rooftop and arches and manicured gardens. Meditation sessions are held here mornings and evenings. The Tibetan **Karma Temple** and **Namgyal Monastery** each contain large prayer wheels. Other noteworthy monasteries include those from the **Chinese Monastery**, **Vietnamese Monastery** and **Nepali Monastery**. Monasteries are open sunrise to sunset.

Great Buddha Statue

MONUMENT

(off Temple St; ☀7am-noon & 2-5pm) This 25m-high Buddha towers above a pleasant garden at the end of Temple St. 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.

Archaeological Museum

MUSEUM

(☎2200739; admission ₹10; ☀8am-5pm) This museum contains a small collection of local Buddha figures and parts of the original granite railings and pillars rescued from the Mahabodhi Temple.

Bodhgaya Multimedia Museum

MUSEUM

(Indian/foreigner ₹30/100; ☀8am-8pm) The Dalai Lama himself blessed the 2010 opening of this visual museum, which is low on production value but big on information and historical perspective.

Courses

Root Institute for Wisdom Culture

MEDITATION, YOGA

(☎2200714; www.rootinstitute.com; ☀office 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm) This foreign-run institute holds various meditation courses (from two to 21 days) between late October and March. A requested donation of ₹750 per day covers the course, accommodation and meals. Intermediate-level courses are also scheduled from December to February.

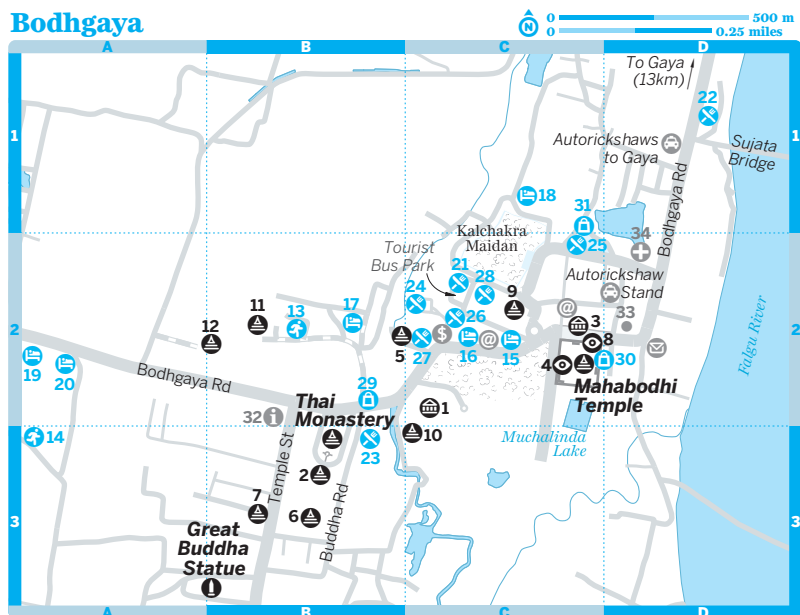
BUDDHA'S BODHI

Surely the most sacred fig tree ever to grace the Earth was the **Bodhi Tree** at Bodhgaya's Mahabodhi Temple, under which Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the spiritual teacher and founder of Buddhism, achieved enlightenment. The tree that stands there today, though, is a mere descendant of the original.

Known as the Sri Maha Bodhi, the original tree was paid special attention by Ashoka the Great, an Indian emperor who ruled most of the subcontinent from 269 to 232 BC, a century or so after Buddha's believed death between 411 and 400 BC. His wife, Tissarakkhā, wasn't such a fan of the tree and in a fit of jealousy and rage, caused the original Bodhi Tree's death by poisonous thorns shortly after becoming queen.

Thankfully, before its death, one of the tree's saplings was carried off to Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka by Sanghamitta (Ashoka's daughter), where it continues to flourish. A cutting was carried back to Bodhgaya and planted where the original once stood. The red sandstone slab between the tree and the temple was placed there by Ashoka and marks the spot of Buddha's enlightenment – it's referred to as the Vajrasan (Diamond Throne).

Buddha was said to have remained under the original tree for one week after his enlightenment, staring unblinking in an awed gesture of gratitude and wonder. Today, pilgrims and tourists alike flock here to attempt to do exactly the same thing, and the tree is considered the most important of Buddhism's four holiest sites.



The 6.45am meditation session is open to all, and for a donation visitors are welcome to stay on for breakfast. You can also catch drop-in yoga classes at 11.45am Tuesday to Saturday.

Bodhgaya Vipassana Meditation Centre

MEDITATION
(Dhamma Bodhi; ☎2200437; www.dhamma.org) Runs intensive 10-day *vipassana* courses twice each month throughout the year. The small compound is 4km west of town on Bodhgaya Rd and runs on donations.

International Meditation Centre **MEDITATION**
(☎2200707; per day from ₹200) The donation-only courses here are more informal and year-round, though anything less than a three-day commitment is frowned upon.

Tergar Monastery **BUDDHISM**
(☎2201256; www.tergar.org) Offers courses on Tibetan Buddhism and welcomes long-term qualified volunteer English teachers.

Sleeping

Rates listed are for the high season (from December to January) but can fall by as much as 50% in the low season, so it pays to negotiate. A 10% tax is often tacked on to midrange choices and above.

TOP CHOICE **Mohammad's House** **GUESTHOUSE** \$
(☎9934022691; yasmd_2002@rediffmail.com; near Kal Chakra Ground, Miya Bigha; d without bathroom ₹250-350, with bathroom ₹400-500; @☎) This is a wonderful opportunity to live within a village (Miya Bigha). Rooms are basic but spotless and popular with long-term stayers. A rooftop terrace gives commanding views of rice paddies, sunsets and monasteries. Friendly Mohammad is a mine of useful information and advice, an excellent chef (p520) and refuses to pay commission to rickshaw touts. There's a one-month minimum stay in high season.

TOP CHOICE **Taj Darbar** **HOTEL** \$\$\$
(☎2200053; www.hotel tajdarbar; Bodhgaya Rd; s/d ₹2800/3200; ☎☎) The best-value top-end choice by a landslide, with polished marble hallways and spacious rooms with ivory-white bed sheets, small seating areas, working desks and sporadic bathtubs. The restaurant is also very popular with expats and good value for money, though we had to cut away an inextinguishable amount of fat from our mutton *bhuna ghost*. It's nothing extraordinary, but it excels at the ordinary.

Rahul Guest House **GUESTHOUSE** \$
(☎2200709; rahul_bodhgaya@yahoo.com; d ₹250-300) This serene guesthouse run as a family

Bodhgaya

☉ Top Sights

Great Buddha Statue	B3
Mahabodhi Temple.....	C2
Thai Monastery.....	B3

☉ Sights

1 Archaeological Museum	C2
2 Bhutanese Monastery.....	B3
3 Bodhgaya Multimedia Museum	C2
4 Bodhi Tree.....	C2
5 Chinese Monastery	B2
6 Indosan Nipponji Temple.....	B3
7 Karma Temple	B3
8 Mahabodhi Temple Entrance	C2
9 Namgyal Monastery.....	C2
10 Nepali Monastery	C3
11 Tergar Monastery.....	B2
12 Vietnamese Monastery.....	B2

✚ Activities, Courses & Tours

13 International Meditation Centre.....	B2
14 Root Institute for Wisdom Culture.....	A3

🛏 Sleeping

Bhutanese Monastery.....	(see 2)
15 Hotel Tathagat International.....	C2
Karma Temple	(see 7)
16 Kirti Guest House	C2
17 Mohammad's House.....	B2

18 Rahul Guest House	C1
Root Institute for Wisdom Culture	(see 14)
19 Royal Residency.....	A2
20 Taj Darbar	A2

🍴 Eating

21 Fujiya Green.....	C2
22 Gautam	D1
23 Hotel Sujata.....	B3
24 Mohammad Restaurant (Aug-Oct).....	C2
25 Mohammad Restaurant (Nov-Mar)	C2
Royal Residency.....	(see 19)
26 Sewak Tea Corner.....	C2
27 Siam Thai.....	C2
28 Tibet Om Cafe	C2

🛒 Shopping

29 Kundan Bazaar.....	B2
30 Mahabodhi Bookshop.....	D2
31 Tibetan Refugee Market.....	C1

Information

32 BSTDC Tourist Complex	B2
33 Middle Way Travels	D2
34 Verma Health Care Centre	D2

home (and kept sparkling clean as a result) is the pick of the assembly of guesthouses backing onto the Kalachakra Maidan. The rooms upstairs, with whitewashed walls, nice breezes and simple furnishings, are better than those on the ground floor.

Kirti Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$\$\$

(☎2200744; kirtihouse744@yahoo.com; Bodhgaya Rd; d incl breakfast ₹2400-3500; 🍴📶) Run by the Tibetan Monastery and one of the best of the midrange places. Kirti is normally known for its clean, bright rooms (although a mouse did scurry across the room we inspected) and its monastery-like facade is particularly pretty. Ask for a mouse-free front room opening out onto the balcony.

Royal Residency

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2200124; www.theroyalresidency.net/bodhgaya; Bodhgaya Rd; s/d ₹6000/6500; 🍴📶) Bodhgaya's most luxurious hotel is about 1.5km west of the centre. Fine woodwork, rich marble, pleasant gardens and comfy rooms await

those who are not too concerned with getting good value for money.

Hotel Tathagat International

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2200106; www.hotelatthagatbodhgaya.net; Bodhgaya Rd; s/d ₹2200/2750; 🍴📶) The tapioca-pudding paint job was a bad idea, but the simple rooms are clean and conservatively furnished. Avoid the cramped deluxe rooms and the Mahabodhi Temple-end rooms above the generator.

If you don't mind some simple rules, it's possible to stay at some of the monasteries and dharma centres. Two of the best are the **Bhutanese Monastery** (☎2200710; Buddha Rd; d ₹300, with bathroom ₹500), a tranquil place typified by colourful surroundings, gardens and big rooms, and the Tibetan **Karma Temple** (☎2200795; ktcmbodhgaya@yahoo.com; Temple St; d shared bathroom ₹300). Another excellent choice is the **Root Institute for Wisdom Culture** (☎2200714; www.rootinstitute.com; dm ₹200), whose well-kept dorm with mosquito nets is open to everyone.



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 are set up by dodgy characters jumping on the charity bandwagon to fleece tourists. Be wary of those who approach you in the street for donations, especially children who besiege tourists asking for money for everything from school books and educational sponsorship to new cricket bats – they may speak several languages but are most likely illiterate. Genuine charities advise that you never give money directly to children. It's far better to help by donating to legitimate institutions or volunteering. For more information, see p39.



Eating & Drinking

During the peak season, when Tibetan pilgrims pour into Bodhgaya, temporary tent restaurants are set up around the Tibetan Refugee Market, serving a range of Tibetan dishes and sweets. Word of warning: no restaurant listed here at the time of writing had a sign boldly claiming its inclusion in the guide at time of publication. Don't be duped.



TOP CHOICE **Mohammad Restaurant**

CAFE \$

(mains ₹30-110) Hands-on Mohammed has been cooking professionally since he was 13 and it shows: his traveller tent serves up fresh, cheap food that you miss no matter where you are from. Fresh vegetables not drowned into submission in butter and oil? Check. (Sorta) English breakfasts, Tibetan *momos* (dumplings), Israeli *saksuka*, quesadillas, Japanese food, Chinese fare, Greek salads, home-made soups – check, check, check. From November to March, he's located next to the Tibetan Refugee Market; from August to October, in an extremely cramped space behind Fujiya Green. Flashy it ain't, but it has some of the town's best food and those in the know flock to it. Save room for the tasty chocolate balls.



TOP CHOICE **Tibet Om Cafe**

TIBETAN, CAFE \$

(dishes ₹30-100; ☺Nov-Mar) A sweet Tibetan family has been coming down from Dharamsala every winter since 1986 to feed travellers hun-

gry for *momos*, pancakes, brown bread, pies and cakes. The food is cheap and tasty and you can loiter endlessly. It lies within the Mayayana Guesthouse of the Namgyal Monastery.

Fujiya Green

CAFE \$

(off Kalachakra Maidan; mains ₹30-85) Another makeshift restaurant that's hugely popular with travellers, with surprisingly brightly coloured walls and tile flooring inside. The menu – running the gamut of Asian travel staples – excels across the board.

Sewak Tea Corner

SWEETS \$

(items ₹6-50) If you're seeking sustenance at rock-bottom prices, look no further than this *dhaba*-style eatery, little more than a glorified roadside stand, for excellent snacks, sweets, lassis and basic thalis. The outdoor seating is a great spot to sit back with a chai and watch Bodhgaya go by.

Siam Thai

THAI \$\$

(Bodhgaya Rd; mains ₹100-195) Authentic is a stretch – dishes here are slightly off – but the fact remains that if you're looking to shake up your tastebuds, this Thai place does the job...just not as good as it should considering it's Thai owned and around the corner from the Thai Monastery. Still, we gobbled down our green curry in an anti-masala delirium. Locals report the quality improves dramatically when the Thai direct flight is operating. We should hope.

Gautam

BREAKFAST \$

(Bodhgaya Rd; mains ₹20-80) A semi-tent affair that's a good choice for standard traveller fare, notably great banana pancakes and cinnamon masala tea – if you can stand the owner spitting in the restaurant's 'garden' while you eat.

The **Royal Residency** (Bodhgaya Rd; mains ₹85-200) and **Hotel Sujata** (Buddha Rd; mains ₹120-250) are similar high-class restaurants in two of Bodhgaya's upmarket hotels. They are the only ones in town to officially serve alcohol (₹250 for a beer).



Shopping

Kundan Bazaar

BOOKSTORE

(Bodhgaya Rd; www.kundanbazar.com; ☺9am-9pm) Novels and Buddhist literature. Book swap or hire.

Mahabodhi Bookshop

BOOKSTORE

(Mahabodhi Temple; ☺5am-9pm) A range of Buddhist literature within the temple complex.

(☉8am-8pm Oct-Jan) There are slim pickings here for winter woollens or textiles – most items appear to be purchased from a (tasteless) department store in Delhi. Elsewhere there are scores of souvenir stalls.

i Information

Internet cafes (per hour ₹30) cluster around Hotel Tathagat International and across from the Mahabodi Temple entrance.

Medical Services

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

Money

State Bank of India (Bodhgaya Rd) Best rates for cash and travellers cheques; has an ATM.

Post

Main post office (cnr Bodhgaya & Godam Rds)

Tourist Information

BSTDC Tourist Complex (☎2200672; cnr Bodhgaya Rd & Temple St; ☎10.30am-5pm Tue-Sat) Useless.

Travel Agencies

Middle Way Travels (☎2200648; Bodhgaya Rd; ☎9am-10pm) A sign of success is when others open businesses with similar names: this is the one to deal with. Almost opposite the temple entrance, the agency exchanges currency and travellers cheques, sells or swaps books, and deals with ticketing and car hire.

i Getting There & Away

Gaya airport is 8km west of town. **Air India** (☎2201155; airport) flies once a week to Kolkata; during the high season there are direct international flights from Bangkok (Thailand), Colombo (Sri Lanka), Thimphu (Bhutan) and Yangon (Myanmar).

Overcrowded shared autorickshaws (₹15) leave from the T-junction of Bodhgaya Rd and Sujata Bridge for the 13km trip to Gaya. A private autorickshaw to Gaya should cost ₹100 in high season.



SERENE SUNSETS

Bodhgaya is often privy to some spectacular sunsets. At dusk, head out halfway across the Sujata Bridge and watch the fiery-red glow descend over the Mahabodhi Temple.

Rajgir

(☎06112 / POP 33,691)

The fascinating surrounds of Rajgir are bounded by five semiarid rocky hills, each lined with vestiges of ancient 'Cyclopean' walls – once the ancient capital of Magadha. 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. However, foreign travellers criminally underdervit the ramshackle town and its environs. It's a shame – a couple of days spent exploring the many historic Buddhist and Jain sites around town and the ancient university site of Nalanda (p522), 12km south, provides the perfect complement to Bodhgaya, 80km away. Beyond that, ruins pepper the landscape. The centre is 500m east of the main road, on which you'll find the train station, bus stand and a number of hotels.

Rajgir Mahotsava, in October, is the town's three-day cultural festival featuring classical Indian music, folk music and dance.

👁 Sights & Activities

The easiest way to see Rajgir's scattered sites is to rent a tonga. A four-hour tour that includes the hot springs, Vishwashanti Stupa, the Son Bhandar caves, Naulakha Mandir, Jain Temple, Japanese Temple, Veerayatan, Venuvana Vihar and the shrine of Maniyar Math is ₹500.

TOP CHOICE Vishwashanti Stupa BUDDHIST TEMPLE

About 5km south of town (take a tonga), a wobbly, single-person **ropeway** (chairlift return ticket ₹30, 8.15am to 1pm and 2pm to 5pm) runs to the top of Ratnagiri Hill and its blazing-white 40m-high Vishwashanti Stupa. Recesses in the stupa feature golden statues of Buddha in the four stages of his life – birth, enlightenment, preaching and death. Expansive views reveal some of the 26 Jain shrines dotting the distant hilltops. If you walk back down, you can detour to the remains of a stupa and **Griddhakuta** (Vulture's Peak), where Buddha preached to his disciples.

TOP CHOICE Veerayatan MUSEUM

Near the Indo Hokke Hotel, this fascinating **Jain museum** (admission ₹15; www.veerayatanbihar.org; ☎7am-6pm) tells the history of each

of the 24 Jain *tirthankars* through ornate dollhouse-like 3-D panel depictions made from wood and metal. The level of detail is astonishing. Don't miss the display by artist-in-residence Arharya Shri Chandanaaji Maharaj, made by hand out of flour.

Other Sightings

LANDMARKS, HOT SPRINGS

Spread around town are relics of the ancient city, caves and places associated with Ajatasatru and Bimbisara. Hindu pilgrims are drawn to the rowdy **Lakshmi Narayan Temple complex**, about 2km south of town, to enjoy the health benefits of the **hot springs**. The murky grey Brahmakund, the hottest spring, is a scalding 45°C. Temple priests will show you around, pour hot water on you and ask for generous donations (₹100 to ₹200 for this contrived ritual); you can politely shoo them off as you are only being targeted because you are a tourist. It's a fascinating but confusing place with no English signs, so tread carefully so you don't unintentionally offend.

Not as spiritually significant, but perhaps more realistic, is next door's Rajasthan-pink **Buddha Jal Vihar** (Indian/foreigner ₹25/50; ☺men 5-10am & noon-9pm, women 10am-noon), an inviting, crystal-clear swimming pool set in well-manicured gardens and perfect to beat the heat.

Sleeping & Eating

TOP CHOICE **Indo Hokke Hotel** BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎255245; centaur@dte.vsnl.net.in; s/d ₹6000/6500; 🍷🍷🍷) Surrounded by lovely gardens, this is Bihar's unique sleeping experience. Most of the rooms are furnished Japanese style with tatami mats instead of beds, teak furniture and Eastern decor. Soak in the Japanese bathhouse and meditate in the towering cylindrical Buddhist prayer hall.

Hotel Gautam Vihar HOTEL \$
(☎255273; Nalanda Rd; dm ₹75, d ₹450, with AC ₹700; 🍷) One of three Bihar Tourism (BSTDC) hotels in town, this is well located between the bus and train stations. Though typically rundown, the rooms are spacious with lounge chairs, TV and hot water and – perhaps more importantly – a friendly manager with hospitality training under his belt.

Siddharth Hotel HOTEL ₹₹
(☎255616; www.siddharthrajgir.com; r ₹1050, with AC ₹2500; 🍷🍷🍷) Near the hot springs, Siddharth has undergone a dramatic renovation and now features all the facilities of a top-

end hotel. Prices are shockingly ambitious in high season (October to March, when rates also include breakfast, mineral water and tea) but come back down to earth with a 30% discount in the low season.

Rajgir Residency

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎255404; www.rajgir-residency.com; s/d ₹3800/4600; 🍷🍷) It lacks personality but has bath-tubs and provides top-end comfort with two restaurants that can whip up Thai or Korean if you ask.

Lotus Restaurant

INDIAN/JAPANESE \$\$\$

(meals ₹40-275) At the Indo Hokke Hotel, this upscale restaurant with high-backed chairs and long tables is part Japanese, part Indian/Chinese. The pricier Japanese menu features soba noodles, teriyaki and tempura, with authentic flavours and fresh ingredients (including authentic pepper, pickles and tea) – a refreshing left off the *ghee* highway.

Green Restaurant

INDIAN \$

(mains ₹40-100) Opposite the Lakshmi Narayan temple complex and hot springs, this simple restaurant offers great Indian meals. The thali (₹60 to ₹100) comes with a memorable spicy dahl fry.

Information

There's a BSTDC tourist office at the Hotel Gautam Vihar, about 1km south of the train station on Nalanda Rd, and a State Bank of India ATM on Bank Rd about 200m west of the bus stand; and another across from the temple complex.

Getting There & Around

Frequent buses run to Gaya (₹40, 2½ hours) and Nalanda (₹6, 30 minutes) from the bus stand on the road to Nalanda. Ridiculously crowded shared jeeps also shuttle between Rajgir and Nalanda (₹10). There is only one direct bus to Patna (₹55, three hours, 4.30pm). Three express trains connect Rajgir with Patna daily (SL/CC/3AC/2AC ₹120/165/210/279, three to five hours, 8.10am, 2.50pm and 11.30pm).

Around Rajgir

NALANDA

(☎061194)

Founded in the 5th century AD, Nalanda was the ancient world's great university and an important Buddhist centre. When Chinese scholar and traveller Xuan Zang visited sometime between 685 and 762 AD, about 10,000 monks and students lived here, studying theology, astronomy, metaphysics, medicine

and philosophy. It's said that Nalanda's three libraries were so extensive they burnt for six months when invaders sacked the university in the 12th century.

Allow an hour or two for wandering the extensive **ruins** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/100, video camera ₹25; ☀9am-5.30pm). They're peaceful and well maintained with a park-like atmosphere of clipped lawns, shrubs and roses. A guide (₹100) is a worthwhile investment in unravelling the labyrinthine buildings and their history. The red-brick ruins consist of nine monasteries and four main temples. Most impressive is the **Great Stupa**, with steps, terraces, a few intact votive stupas, and monks' cells.

Across from the interesting Multimedia Museum is the **archaeological museum** (admission ₹5; ☀8am-5pm), a small but fascinating museum housing the Nalanda University seal and a host of sculptures and bronzes unearthed from Nalanda and Rajgir. Among the many Buddha figures and Picasso-like 9th-century Kirtimukha (gargoyle) is a bizarre multiple-spouted pot.

About 2km further on from the museum is the huge **Xuan Zang Memorial Hall** (Indian/foreigner ₹5/50; ☀8am-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.

Regular shared jeeps run between Rajgir and Nalanda village (₹10), and from there you can take a shared tonga (per person ₹10 when full) for the final 3km to the site of Nalanda.

KUNDALPUR

Just outside Nalanda you'll find the striking **Nandyavarta Mahal** (☀5am-9pm) at Kundalpur, believed by the Jain Digamber sect to be the birthplace of Lord Mahavira, the final *tirthankar* and founder of Jainism. The small temple complex houses three hot-white temples, the main featuring a to-scale postured idol of Mahavira. Inside the serene **Trikal Chaubeesi Jinmandir** within the same complex you'll find 72 *tirthankar* idols representing 24 each of the past age, the present age and the future age.

JHARKHAND

Jharkhand was hewn out of neighbouring Bihar in 2000 to meet the autonomy demands of the Adivasi (tribal) population. Despite the

fledgling state having a jaw-dropping 40% of the country's mineral wealth (mostly 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 poverty, incompetence, corruption, and outbursts of Maoist and Naxalite violence. For travellers, Jharkhand's prime attractions are the Jain pilgrimage centre at Parasnath Hill, its national parks and the chance to explore a tourist-free northern India.

Ranchi

☎0651 / POP 846,454

Set on a plateau at 700m and marginally cooler than the plains, Jharkhand's capital, Ranchi, was the summer capital of Bihar under the British. There's little of interest in the city and it's not really on the way to anywhere except Betla (Palamau) National Park (p525).

👁 Sights & Activities

Jagannath Temple

HINDU TEMPLE

The Jagannath Temple, about 12km southwest of town (₹200 to ₹250 return by autorickshaw), is a smaller version of the great Jagannath Mandir at Puri (p595), and is open to non-Hindus. Every year, at the same time and in the same manner as in Puri, Jagannath and his brother and sister gods are charioted to their holiday home, a smaller temple some 500m away.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

Station Rd, running between the train and bus stations, is lined with hotels of varying quality. Other hotels and restaurants can be found on the seemingly endless Main Rd, which runs at right angles to Station Rd. A 7% luxury tax is sometimes levied.

TOP CHOICE Chanakya
BNR Hotel

HERITAGE HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎2461481; chanakyaabnranchi@hotmail.com; Station Rd; s/d ₹1730/2081; 📞@📧) This part-historic rail hotel, almost opposite the train station, is a red-tiled terracotta-roofed Raj relic. It's been completely renovated by the Chanakya group (and expanded from 14 to 82 rooms, no less), with extra-large rooms, rain-style showers and hardwood floors. There's free wi-fi in the business centre, a bar, a very good restaurant and parrots in the trees. Unfortunately, the super-spacious 110-year-old heritage rooms have all been booked on contract, but check ahead just in case that went belly up.

THE HOLY PARASNATH

Parasnath, a dusty town in eastern Jharkhand, is the railhead for the major Jain pilgrimage centre in east India. The site and its 31 temples blanket the top of **Parasnath Hill** – Jharkhand's highest point. At the summit (1366m), where the Parasnath Temple now stands, 20 of the 24 Jain *tirthankars* reached salvation, including Parasnath at the age of 100.

The best approach is from the auspicious town of Madhuban, 13km northeast of Parasnath, and home to some magnificent temples itself. The daily pilgrimage begins at 3am from the village, where it's a 9km jaunt to the top, followed by a 9km loop visiting each of the temples. The entire 27km circuit takes about 12 hours. If you don't want to walk you can hire a *dandi* (a cart carried by two men) for ₹2000 return. Water and snacks are available along the way. During holidays, up to 15,000 people per day make the jaunt.

You're likely to spend one, if not two, nights here. There are several *dharamsalas* (pilgrim's rest houses) in Madhuban, which are more or less free save a nominal upkeep fee, but nearly always jam-packed. For a proper hotel, the government-run and extra friendly **Yatri Nivas** (☎0658232365; shikharjioffice@yahoo.com; r from ₹300) has refreshingly comfortable rooms (with TV, lockers and hot water). Don't miss the small but well-done **Jain Museum** (admission ₹5; ☎8am–6.30pm Mar–Oct, 8.30am–6pm Nov–Feb).

Parasnath is on the Kolkata–Gaya–Delhi train line. Convenient options include the 12875 *Neelachal Express* to Gaya (SL/3AC/2AC ₹140/292/383, three hours) and Varanasi (₹196/494/662, seven hours) at 12.44am; and the 12308 *Jodhpur Howrah Superfast Express* to Kolkata (₹175/434/581, 5½ hours, 10.26pm). Regular minibuses run from Parasnath's bus stand to Madhuban every half-hour (₹30, 40 minutes). From Ranchi, you'll need to hire a car.

Hotel Embassy

(☎2460449; embassyhotel@rediffmail.com; Station Rd; s/d ₹600/700, with AC from ₹700/850; ☎) One of the few budget places along Station Rd to accept foreigners; the comfortable rooms are refreshingly contemporary and decently clean.

HOTEL \$

Hotel Capitol Hill

(☎2331330; www.hotelcapitolhill.com; Main Rd; s/d ₹4500/5000; ☎☎) A classy upmarket hotel in the Capitol Hill shopping complex. The ultra-modern 3rd-floor lobby with cream leather chairs complements equally modern rooms with a Scandinavian touch and wi-fi. The lipstick-red bar is Ranchi's most stylish.

HOTEL \$\$\$

Planet Masala

(56C Main Rd; mains ₹50–90) A great, modern cafe offering some 26 types of dosas, veg pizzas and Indian/Chinese dishes, sundaes and proper but odd espresso. The jazzed-up four-star thali (₹138; feeds two) is excellent.

CAFE \$

The Nook

(Station Rd; mains ₹75–140) The best midrange restaurant in the train station area; the dining room in Hotel Kwalita Inns is comfortable and the service attentive without being

INDIAN \$\$

obsequious. The Indian, tandoori and Chinese excel and there's alcohol on tap.

Hotel Amrit

(☎2461952; Station Rd; s/d/tr from ₹380/500/600, with AC ₹980/1200; ☎) Cheap option near the Embassy. AC rooms are in much better shape than others. Paint donations probably accepted – Lord knows it needs it.

HOTEL \$

Veda é Café

(3rd fl, Roshpa Tower, Main Rd; sandwiches ₹45–80) Stylish cafe across from Planet Masala, with sandwiches, pizza and better coffee.

CAFE \$

Information

The most helpful tourist information is at **Samridhi Travels** (☎2332179; www.samridhitravels.com; Main Rd; ☎8am–8pm Mon–Sat, till 6pm Sun) at the Birsa Vihar tourist complex. It makes train reservations and accommodation bookings and is next door to a most unhelpful government tourist office. The **State Bank of India** (Main Rd; ☎10am–3.30pm Mon–Fri) changes cash and travellers cheques, and has an ATM. **Chawla Travels & Cafe** (Gururanak Market, Station Rd; per hr ₹20; ☎8am–10.30pm), within a small shopping centre next to Hotel Embassy, has internet access.

In the same shopping centre is **Suhana Tour and Travels** (☎3293808, 9431171394; suhana_

jharkhandtour@yahoo.co.in; ☎8am-8pm Mon-Sat, till 2pm Sun), which organises day trips to local waterfalls (from ₹400) and three-day trips to Betla (Palamau) National Park with unsophisticated drivers (from ₹4200 for four people), as well as other transport ticketing.

i Getting There & Away

Ranchi's Birsa Munda Airport is 6km from the city centre. **Kingfisher Red** (☎1800 2333131; airport) flies daily to Kolkata and Delhi (direct flights to Patna had been cancelled during time of research). **Air India** (☎2503255) has daily flights to Delhi and Mumbai. **Jet Airways** (☎2250051) flies to Kolkata and Delhi. A pre-paid taxi to Station Rd from the airport is ₹200 *outside* the terminal (you'll pay ₹50 more inside).

From the government bus stand on Station Rd, there are five hourly departures to Gaya (₹130, six hours) from 6.30am to 10.30am; and one to Patna (₹183, nine hours, 9.30pm). There are additional and more comfortable departures from the Birsa bus stand off Old HB Rd. Buses to Daltonganj (for Betla National Park) leave from the Ratu Rd bus stand (non-AC/AC ₹100/200, six hours, hourly). From the Birsa Vihar tourist complex on Main Rd there are two deluxe buses to Patna at 8pm (non-AC ₹200) and 9.30pm (AC ₹500).

The 18626 *Hatia-Patna Express* (6.15am) calls at Gaya (AC Chair ₹324, 6½ hours) and Patna (CC ₹383, 10 hours). For Kolkata you can take the 12020 *Shatabdi Express* (CC/1AC ₹645/1195, 7½ hours, 1.40pm) or the overnight 18616 *Howrah-Hatia Express* (SL/3AC/2AC/1AC ₹187/496/679/1140, 9½ hours, 9.40pm).

Betla (Palamau) National Park

☎06562

This undisputed natural gem is 140km west of Ranchi and one of the better places in India to see wild elephants. Tiger sightings are comparatively rare. The park covers around 1026 sq km, while the core area of 232 sq km was declared as Betla National Park in 1989. Stands of sal forest, rich evergreens, teak trees and bamboo thickets are home to some 17 tigers, 52 leopards, 216 elephants and four lonely nilgai (antelope) according to a 2007 census. This area was the seat of power of the Adivasi kings of the Chero dynasty and the ruins of its 16th-century forts and 10km of walls still exist in the jungle.

The **park** (☎222650, 9973819242; dtj_fdp trpal@sancharnet.in; admission per vehicle ₹100, camera/video ₹100/500; ☎6-10am & 2-5pm) is open year-round, but the best time to visit is October to April. If you can stand the heat, May is prime time for tiger spotting as forest cover is reduced and animals venture out in search of waterholes. **Jeep safaris** (per hr ₹350) can be arranged privately at the park gate. You must also hire a local **guide** (per hr ₹50) to accompany you.

The park has two pachyderms for **elephant safaris** (per hr ₹200, up to 4 people) so you can plod into the jungle for an unparalleled look at the flora and fauna.

The best accommodation is the superbly renovated **Forest Lodge** (r without/with AC ₹920/1070; ☎), with viewing balconies, LCD TV, spacious bathrooms and an all-around luxurious feel (for a Indian-run forest lodge, mind you). Just nearby is the **Tree House** (r ₹318), with two elevated sets of rooms built out of teak and containing two bedrooms, a bathroom and an observation deck. Both can be booked through the park office. The walls drew the short straw at the government-run **Van Vihar** (☎06567226513; dm ₹100, d from ₹400, with AC ₹900; ☎), where the new flooring does little to compensate for the fact that there is more peeling going on here than at a banana plantation!

The nearest town to the park entrance is Daltonganj (Medininagar), 25km away. There are six daily buses between Betla and Daltonganj (₹15, one hour) or you can arrange a taxi for around ₹500. Daltonganj is connected to Ranchi by bus (non-AC/AC ₹100/200, six hours, hourly). Alternatively, organise a tour through a Ranchi travel agency that will take you directly to the park. Suhana Tour and Travels (p524) has two-day trips, or longer, from ₹3200 per person, including transport, accommodation and safari. This is probably the best option considering the inadequate transport and safety issues in this isolated and sometimes lawless part of the state. In any case, call the park for security advice before leaving. If you do come independently, **Betla Tour & Travels** (☎226559, 9955527371), next door to Van Vihar, can make all of your arrangements.

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