

# Passing scenes of ritual, family, rural life, food

► **RAILWAYS**  
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I know nothing of this when I board my first sleeper, but I've planned a route that will take me from Delhi to the Ganges and back, another from Mumbai to southern Goa, and a night train from Kolkata toward India's border with Nepal to see the holy grail of train enthusiasts: the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway.

The first experience is a night train, the Delhi to Benares Shiv Ganga Express, and I double-check my seat assignment on the platform, where the curious will find their name in Hindi next to their berth number. Onboard, slices of life play out in every direction — there's an intimacy as if you're sitting at someone's cafe table or in their living room — little movies that roll right in front of you or slide slowly by outside the window. (**Numbers 1-3** on the map.)

Vendors walk the aisles calling "Chai! Chai! Chai!" hawking their sweet, milky tea, followed by a parade of wallahs (people who perform specific tasks) selling different foods, including complete dinners made in mammoth galley cars. This isn't the civilized charm of France's TGV, it's funky and alive.

En route to Varanasi, we pass a temple festooned with garlands of red and white lights and the 4-year-old with the family in front of me shrieks with joy when she sees it, putting her hands together to pray.

Once in the city, miles of ghats (concrete stairs that stretch along the riverbank) lead down to the Ganges. Travel-weary pilgrims come to bathe in its sacred waters, locals wash their clothes, and the dead are brought to be cremated on riverside pyres. The smoke hovers over the water, sticks in the back of your throat. It is hard not to be moved by people's devotion and the beauty and mystery of the Hindu temples that crown the ghats. Lines between life, religion, and ritual don't exist. Pilgrim or tourist, you are part of the flow.

Indian trains can be dirty, bordering on disgusting, frustrating, and incredibly hot, even with the fans blasting. The higher up the travel class scale you go, the more private and comfortable the experience is — and the more insulated, for better and worse.

Sleeper class without air conditioning is the best and worst of Indian rail travel. It's where you are most likely to talk to your neighbor and see the glorious weirdness of it all: the tiny scenes of family life, the snoring, the passive-aggressive eunuchs who shame travelers into giving them money, then begrudgingly bless



PHOTOS BY JOE RAY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**On the Mandovi Express, 12 hours from Mumbai to Margao, the galley car is typically big and busy. A woman beside the Ganges prepares for the Aarti ritual by arranging flowers as offerings.**

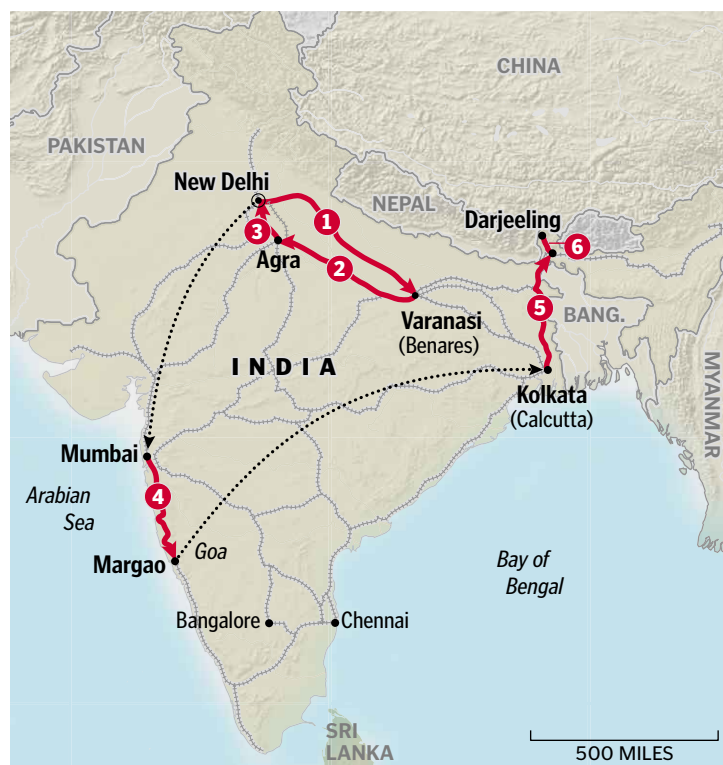
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them when they do. You can stare out the window for hours or sit in the open door between two cars and recalibrate your take on life.

The Mandovi Express, the 12-hour ride between Mumbai and southern Goa (4) is a near bust. I've chosen to spend the day on the train and discover that not only are the windows sealed shut in 2A class, but also on this hot day, they won't even open the exit doors between stops until early evening. You want the wind in your face on these rides. Once they finally open the doors, it's all worth it. Toes dangling out into the void — it's a beautiful show.

Palm trees begin to appear and near Kudal the sun becomes a golden orange unseen farther north. We're remote enough that water buffalo in the train's shadow are still spooked by the passing engine. People continually stop to watch the train's blue streak go by. Children playing cricket halt their match and, smiling, clasp their hands overhead in a salute. Farther on, a woman walks toward a distant village, alone in a great wheat field, her flowing sari a sunlit blaze of orange.

"The train is not about getting to a destination. In the winter it travels through fog and unknown villages. There are even places where it stops without any buildings," says Somit Doshi, 38, of Mumbai, who runs Strawberry Outbound, an outdoor adventure



SOURCES: Indian Railways; ESRI

ED WIEDERER/GLOBE STAFF

and team-building company. "I do a train journey once a year with a group of friends. You meet fellow passengers — all sorts of people. We call it 'romancing.'"

His words remind me why I'm headed from Kolkata (5) to Darjeeling (6): for a joy ride on the Toy Train.

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (a.k.a. the Toy Train), built in 1879-81, is a set of century-old, coal-powered steam engines that climb up into the mountains and directly into the hearts of train aficionados around the world. The train winds through thick forest, tiny hill towns lost in the clouds, and tea plantations with flat-topped

bushes punctuated only by the bright flecks of color worn by the women picking leaves and buds that make the world's best tea.



You hear it first. A goose-bump-raising whistle blast that echoes through the valleys between the train's origin at the New Jalpaiguri station in Siliguri, creeps over the 7,407-foot-high point at Ghum, and coasts down to Darjeeling's (6) hill station. Closer, there will be a plume of smoke that looks like a hillside fire, accompanied by an unmistakable chug-chug-chug.

It feels culled from a reel of cinematic railroad history and by the time it appears hissing and spurting around the corner, every eye is on it.

"We've seen this since we were babies. The people of Darjeeling love the steam engine. It has this rhythm, it has this sound. . . . If it goes uphill, it makes one sound and if it goes downhill, it makes another," says Hiren Trikhatri, chief ticket inspector at the Darjeeling station, the line's home in name and spir-

it. "Everyone still waves when the train goes by, even the baby in the mother's arms. If tourists miss this ride, they've blown their itinerary. You don't find something like this anywhere else in the world."

They say that you either leave India right after you get here or come back for the rest of your life. On her rails, I don't think about leaving, just about how India's frenetic pace slows as we travel along the seams. On her rails, the needle gets under my skin.

Joe Ray can be reached at [www.joe-ray.com](http://www.joe-ray.com).

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## If you go . . .

### How to book a ride

**Indian Railways reservations**  
[www.irctc.co.in](http://www.irctc.co.in)  
Tickets can be purchased online but the site often balks at foreign credit cards. You pay a premium at [www.cleartrip.com](http://www.cleartrip.com), but the probability of the transaction going

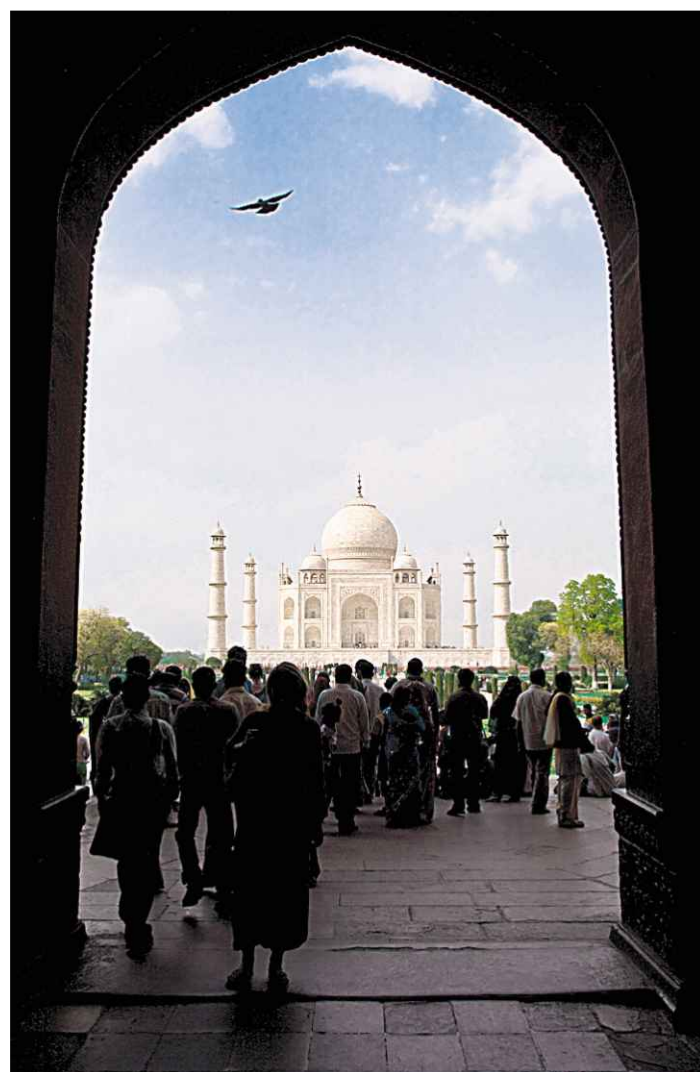
through improves considerably. Tickets can also be purchased at train stations. Watch for and use the tourist ticket line at many stations. A typical bare-bones sleeper ticket on an overnight train runs around \$10 and goes up gradually from there.

### What to eat

The many lines have individual specialties and their kitchens often are larger and better than many restaurants. It's worth asking a fellow passenger what's good on a particular line. It's hard to spend more than a few dollars on a meal.

### Where to stay

**Palace On Ganges**  
B-1/158 Assi Ghat  
Varanasi (Benares)  
011-91-542-2315050  
[palaceonganges@indiatimes.com](mailto:palaceonganges@indiatimes.com)  
Nice rooms upward of \$50 per night. Make sure to ask to see other rooms, a view of the ghats, or the rooftop room.  
**Chateau Windsor Hotel**  
86 Veer Nariman Road, Churchgate  
Mumbai  
011-91-22-6622-44-55  
Basic, and fun. About \$75-\$100 per night depending on amenities. Ask to see available rooms when you check in.  
[www.chateauwindsor.com/](http://www.chateauwindsor.com/)  
**D'Souza Guest House**  
On the small road between Benaulim and Colva  
Benaulim (southern Goa)  
011-91-832-2770583  
Stay in a local home at modest prices a short walk from the beach.  
**Hotel Aliment**  
Dr. Zakir Hussain Road  
Darjeeling  
011-91-354-2255068  
[alimentweb@sify.com](mailto:alimentweb@sify.com)  
Not for those who need frills — the water heater is on for 90 minutes a day, the door lock is a padlock — but it has an authentic hiker-backpacker set feeling. Try to stay on the upper floors.



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