Tour Code
IN10

ADVENTURESABROAD

INDIA'S LADAKH, DARJEELING & ASSAM

Monasteries, Tea Estates & Brahmaputra Wildlife

17 days

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Day 1 Arrive Delhi

Welcome to India's capital, a sprawling metropolis where ancient monuments stand amid modern infrastructure. Contemporary Delhi began as a series of fortified cities—seven distinct settlements built and abandoned over 2,000 years—each leaving architectural traces visible today. The current incarnation serves as both historical repository and gateway to the subcontinent, tree-lined avenues connecting Mughal-era tombs, British colonial buildings, and the contemporary government quarter. This evening we gather for our first meal together, meeting fellow travellers before tomorrow's early flight to the Himalaya.

Overnight in Delhi (airport area hotel).

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Delhi - Fly to Leh

Our Himalayan journey begins with an early morning flight from Delhi to Leh, soaring over successive mountain ranges to land at 3524 metres/11,562 feet elevation. The day remains intentionally light—altitude acclimatization requires patience and gradual activity. After hotel check-in, we receive a comprehensive briefing on altitude awareness, hydration protocols, and the importance of measured movement over the next few days.

A suggested gentle walk through Leh's market introduces the rhythm of Ladakhi life: prayer flags fluttering above narrow lanes, apricot vendors arranged beside incense sellers, the sharp mountain air carrying scents of juniper smoke from monastery hearths. The market serves both local Ladakhis and the surrounding villages, its stalls reflecting the region's position where Indian, Tibetan, and Central Asian trade routes once converged. We keep movement minimal, allowing our bodies to adjust to reduced oxygen levels.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Leh: Hemis Gompa & Stok

This morning takes us deeper into Ladakh's monastic heartland with visits to two significant Buddhist centres. Hemis Monastery, nestled in a secluded valley 40 kilometres from Leh, ranks as the region's largest and wealthiest gompa. Founded in the 1630s, Hemis accumulated substantial wealth through royal patronage and extensive land holdings—its treasuries once contained gold statues, ancient manuscripts, and religious artifacts that made it Ladakh's economic powerhouse as well as spiritual centre. The monastery holds particular fame for its triennial festival when masked dances re-enact Buddhist teachings, and for its colossal thangka—a religious scroll measuring 12 by 18 metres, unfurled once every twelve years for public veneration.

From Hemis we continue to Stok Monastery, a 14th-century gompa that houses a remarkable library containing 108 volumes of the Kangyur—Buddha's teachings translated into Tibetan. The monastery sits directly below Stok Palace, still home to Ladakh's royal family who relocated here in the 1840s after Dogra forces conquered Leh. The current queen mother maintains the palace as both residence and museum, its collection including royal ceremonial robes, turquoise-studded jewelry, and thangkas spanning five centuries. Views from the monastery courtyard extend across the Indus Valley to Leh, the same perspectives Ladakhi kings surveyed for generations.

The afternoon remains free for continued acclimatization—gentle walks, reading, or simply absorbing the high-altitude landscape's stark beauty.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Leh: Khardung La Pass & Leh Palace

We drive to Khardung La this morning, a mountain pass perched at 5359 metres/17,582 feet on the ancient trade route connecting Leh to the Nubra and Shyok valleys.* While local claims of "world's highest motorable road" remain disputed—several Himalayan passes reach higher elevations—Khardung La nonetheless provides dramatic perspectives over the Ladakh and Zanskar ranges. The pass served crucial strategic importance during the Silk Road era, with caravans moving goods between Central Asia and the subcontinent. At the summit, prayer flags snap in thin air, and on clear days views extend over bare brown peaks stretching toward Tibet and Pakistan. Yaks often graze the surrounding slopes, their thick coats and efficient lungs adapted to extreme altitude where oxygen levels measure roughly 60 percent of sea level.

Returning to Leh, we visit the historic Leh Palace, a nine-storey royal residence built in the 17th century. King Sengge Namgyal modelled his palace on Tibet's Potala Palace—the same distinctive architectural style of stacked structures rising from rocky outcrops. The mudbrick and stone construction blends Tibetan, Indian, and Mughal influences, its balconies offering panoramic views over Leh town and the surrounding peaks. The palace served as the royal family's main residence until the 1840s, when Dogra forces from Kashmir conquered Ladakh and the royals relocated to Stok. Though now largely empty—many treasures moved to Stok Palace—the building's scale and commanding position demonstrate the power Ladakhi kings once wielded across this high-altitude realm.

* NOTE: Khardung La Pass may be inaccessible due to weather conditions, particularly during March when snow often blocks high-altitude roads. Alternative sightseeing in the Leh area will be arranged if the pass is closed.

Overnight in Leh.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Leh: Monasteries & Cultural Immersion

This morning presents a choice between two of Ladakh's most significant religious sites. Thiksey Monastery rises in a multi-tiered cascade up the hillside, its distinctive profile often compared to Tibet's Potala Palace. Founded in the 15th century, the gompa maintains an active community of monks whose morning prayers fill the assembly hall with chanting and ceremonial horns. The monastery houses a 15-metre Maitreya Buddha statue, its gilded presence dominating the temple's upper level. Alternatively, Shey Palace served as Ladakh's summer capital for centuries, its temple containing a massive copper-gilded Buddha commissioned in the 1630s.

The afternoon shifts to cultural immersion as we visit a traditional Ladakhi village. Inside a family home we share butter tea—the salty Tibetan-style beverage that provides essential calories and hydration at altitude. Our hosts explain daily life rhythms: barley cultivation in brief summer months, livestock management, preserving vegetables for winter isolation when snow blocks roads. Traditional crafts like carpet weaving and woodcarving continue in many households, skills passed through generations.

For those seeking deeper spiritual connection, optional evening prayers at a monastery offer a meditative close to the day.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Leh - Fly to Delhi

After breakfast we transfer to Leh Airport for our return flight to Delhi, transitioning from Ladakh's stark desert beauty to the lush landscapes that define India's eastern Himalaya. The flight path retraces our journey over successive mountain ranges, the geography shifting from arid Trans-Himalayan terrain to the fertile river valleys of the plains.

Upon arrival at Delhi Airport, we transfer to our Aerocity hotel. The remainder of the day offers leisure time to rest, explore the hotel's surroundings, or prepare for tomorrow's continuation to Darjeeling. This pause between high-altitude intensity and the programme ahead provides welcome breathing space.

Overnight in Delhi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Delhi - Fly to Darjeeling

An early transfer brings us to Delhi Airport for our morning flight to Bagdogra, the gateway to India's eastern Himalayan hill stations. The landscape shifts dramatically during the flight—from the dry plains around Delhi to the lush, tea-planted slopes of West Bengal. Upon arrival at Bagdogra, we begin the three-hour drive to Darjeeling, climbing from the humid plains into cooler mountain air.

The road winds through terraced tea estates that have defined this region's economy since the 1850s, when British planters discovered these slopes produced exceptional tea. Darjeeling clings to a ridge at 2042 metres/6700 feet elevation, its Victorian-era buildings and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries creating an architectural blend unique to this border region. The town developed as a colonial hill station—a summer retreat from Calcutta's oppressive heat—and maintains that legacy in its Gothic churches, mock-Tudor cottages, and the steam railway that still operates along impossible gradients.

We check into our hotel with time to settle before evening.

Overnight in Darjeeling.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Darjeeling Orientation & Tea Tasting

A morning walking tour introduces Darjeeling's compact centre, the orientation covering The Mall and Chowrasta Square—the social heart of hill station life for 150 years. The Mall's wide pedestrian promenade connects shops selling Tibetan handicrafts, bookstores stocked with mountaineering literature, and cafés where chai arrives in porcelain cups rather than roadside glasses. Chowrasta Square serves as the town's meeting point, locals and visitors gathering where four roads converge beneath views extending to Kanchenjunga when clouds permit.

This walk reveals Darjeeling's layered character: colonial architecture housing contemporary businesses, Tibetan refugees operating restaurants beside Nepali shopkeepers, Buddhist prayer flags strung above Christian church spires. The town became refuge for Tibetans fleeing Chinese occupation in 1959, their community adding another cultural strand to an already complex tapestry of Bengali, Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha residents.

Our evening tea tasting session provides introduction to why Darjeeling tea commands premium prices worldwide. We sample various grades and flush periods—first flush teas picked in March offering delicate floral notes, second flush from May and June producing the muscatel flavours that made Darjeeling famous. The tasting reveals how elevation, rainfall timing, and processing methods create distinct characteristics in leaves grown mere kilometres apart.

Overnight in Darjeeling.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Darjeeling: Toy Train & Tea Estate

This morning offers an optional pre-dawn excursion to Tiger Hill, weather permitting, where sunrise illuminates Kanchenjunga's five peaks—at 8586 metres/28,169 feet, the world's third-highest mountain and sacred to local Buddhist and Hindu communities. The 90-kilometre distant peak glows orange as first light strikes its snow fields, the spectacle drawing crowds to the viewpoint's terraces. After returning to the hotel, breakfast precedes our main activity.

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, a UNESCO World Heritage site, provides this morning's journey. The narrow-gauge steam train operates on the Darjeeling-Ghum-Batasia Loop sector, a two-hour round trip offering glimpses into the region's colonial past. Built between 1879 and 1881, the railway conquered gradients considered impossible for locomotive traction—engineers employed sharp curves, reverses, and loops rather than tunnels to gain elevation. The line climbs from Darjeeling's lower reaches through pine forests to Ghum, at 2258 metres the

highest railway station in India, before descending via the famous Batasia Loop where tracks spiral 360 degrees around a war memorial.

This afternoon we visit Happy Valley Tea Estate, one of Darjeeling's oldest gardens established in 1854. The visit includes walking through terraced tea bushes where pickers work with practiced efficiency, selecting only the finest leaves and buds. Inside the factory we observe the withering, rolling, oxidation, and drying processes that transform fresh leaf into finished tea. A tasting session concludes the visit, multiple varieties demonstrating how processing decisions affect final flavour profiles.

The evening remains free for independent exploration—browsing bookshops, shopping for Tibetan handicrafts, or simply relaxing at a café.

Overnight in Darjeeling.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Darjeeling: Himalayan Heritage

After breakfast we begin a half-day tour highlighting Darjeeling's cultural and natural heritage. The Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, established in 1954 following the first successful Everest ascent, chronicles the region's mountaineering history through equipment displays, expedition photographs, and detailed topographical models. Adjacent to the institute, the Tenzing Norgay Memorial honours the Sherpa who reached Everest's summit with Edmund Hillary in May 1953—Tenzing spent his later years in Darjeeling, training mountaineers and advocating for Sherpa recognition.

The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park focuses on conservation of endangered Himalayan species. Red pandas, snow leopards, and Himalayan wolves inhabit enclosures designed to replicate their natural habitats, the zoo's breeding programmes contributing significantly to species preservation efforts. The facility sits at elevation suitable for these cold-adapted animals, making it one of few zoos worldwide where such species thrive.

Our afternoon visits include the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre, established in 1959 to provide livelihood for Tibetans fleeing Chinese occupation. The centre maintains traditional carpet weaving and handicraft production, skills that might otherwise have been lost during diaspora. We then proceed to Observatory Hill, a sacred site for both Buddhists and Hindus where prayer flags and religious offerings cluster around the Mahakal Temple. The hilltop provides panoramic views across Darjeeling's ridges to the plains far below.

The evening offers time to pack and prepare for tomorrow's journey to Assam.

Overnight in Darjeeling.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Darjeeling - Bagdogra Airport - Fly to Guwahati

After breakfast we check out and drive approximately three and a half hours to Bagdogra Airport. Here you will bid your Tour Leader farewell as they will not be accompanying the group on the cruise on which your experience will be expertly managed by the ship's crew and expert guides.

Our afternoon flight to Guwahati includes a layover in Kolkata—a four and a half hour gap allowing the aircraft connection to India's northeast. We arrive in Guwahati by late evening, the city serving as the gateway to Assam and the broader northeastern states.

Guwahati spreads along the Brahmaputra's southern bank, this ancient city functioning as a trading hub for two millennia. The Brahmaputra—one of the world's great rivers—originates in Tibet, flows 2900 kilometres through the Himalaya, and creates the massive floodplains that define Assam's geography and agriculture. Tomorrow we board our river vessel for four days exploring this landscape.

Upon arrival at Guwahati Airport, we transfer to our hotel for overnight rest before beginning the cruise portion of our journey.

Overnight in Guwahati.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Guwahati to Silghat - Embark Cruise

After breakfast we transfer to Pandu Port where we board ABN Sukapha, our vessel for the next four days navigating the Brahmaputra. The ship carries a maximum of 24 passengers in Upper Deck cabins, its shallow draft and twin engines designed specifically for this powerful river's shifting channels and sandbars. Boarding brings the pleasant chaos of settling into cabins, meeting crew, and orienting ourselves to the vessel's layout before we cast off mid-morning.

We enjoy lunch onboard as the vessel cruises downstream toward Sualkuchi, a bustling town that serves as the centre of Assamese silk production. An afternoon walk through Sualkuchi's workshops reveals the complete silk manufacturing process—from cocoon boiling and thread spinning through natural dyeing to the intricate hand-weaving of mekhela chadars, the two-piece traditional sari worn by Assamese women. The silk industry here dates back centuries, techniques passed through family lineages. The distinctive muga silk produced only in Assam comes from semi-domesticated silkworms that feed on specific tree leaves, its natural golden colour requiring no dye. Weavers work on traditional pit looms, their hands flying across threads in patterns memorized since childhood, each mekhela chadar requiring several days of concentrated work.

The vessel continues upstream, docking near the great Saraighat Bridge where the Brahmaputra narrows to approximately one kilometre. The bridge marks the site of the 1671 Battle of Saraighat, where Ahom Kingdom forces defeated Mughal expansion attempts—a victory still celebrated in Assamese culture as a defining moment of regional identity and independence.

Overnight aboard ABN Sukapha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 13 Kamakhya Temple & River Journey

This morning we drive up Nilachal Hill to visit Kamakhya Temple, one of India's most revered centres of tantric practice. Dedicated to the goddess Kamakhya—the granter of desires—the temple marks one of the 51 Shakti Peethas, sites where body parts of the goddess Sati fell to earth according to Hindu mythology. The current structure dates to the 16th century, built by Ahom kings, though worship at this location extends back over a millennium. The temple's architecture blends Aryan and indigenous Assamese elements, its beehive-shaped shikhara distinct from temples in other Indian regions.

We walk the temple's exterior grounds among pilgrims from across India, the site drawing devotees year-round but particularly during the annual Ambubachi Mela when hundreds of thousands gather. The vibrant energy, devotional chanting, and continuous flow of offerings provide insight into living Hindu practice rather than historical monument.

Returning to the vessel, we cruise upstream toward Mayong, the landscape shifting from urban Guwahati to rural riverbanks where villages appear among mango groves and rice paddies. The Brahmaputra's scale becomes evident—at places the river spreads several kilometres wide, its channels constantly shifting as monsoon floods rework sandbars and islands each year.

Overnight aboard ABN Sukapha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 14 River Village & Upstream Navigation

This morning we cruise upstream and visit a riverside village surrounded by lush vegetable fields. The Brahmaputra's annual flooding deposits nutrient-rich sediment that makes these floodplains extraordinarily fertile—the foundation of Assam's agricultural abundance. Village homes sit on raised platforms designed to survive seasonal inundation, the walk revealing daily rhythms of farming and fishing that define life along the river.

The day proceeds mostly with upstream navigation, presenting opportunity for reading, writing about the journey thus far, or simply watching life unfold along the riverbanks. Fishermen work from dugout canoes, water buffalo wallow in shallows, and jungle-covered hills rise on either bank as we move deeper into Assam's interior. River dolphins occasionally surface—the endangered Ganges river dolphin still survives in these waters.

An onboard Indian cooking demonstration this afternoon reveals techniques for regional dishes—the use of mustard oil, bamboo shoots, and

fresh fish that define Assamese cuisine, aromatic combinations of ginger, garlic, and coriander that flavour curries throughout the northeast.

The vessel's pace allows appreciation of the Brahmaputra's role in shaping northeastern India's culture and economy, this major river winding through landscapes that have changed little over centuries.

Overnight aboard ABN Sukapha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 15 Kaziranga National Park

We cruise to reach Silghat this morning, where after lunch we disembark for our drive to Kaziranga National Park. A late afternoon jeep safari explores the park's Western Range, introducing us to one of Asia's most significant wildlife sanctuaries.

Covering approximately 430 square kilometres, this UNESCO World Heritage Site protects the world's largest population of Indian one-horned rhinoceros—over 2400 individuals, more than two-thirds of the species' global total. The rhinos graze openly across Kaziranga's grasslands and marshes, their prehistoric appearance—armour-like skin folds, single nasal horn—unchanged for millions of years. The park also shelters exceptional populations of Indian wild water buffalo, the highest density of Royal Bengal tigers anywhere (one per five square kilometres), plus significant numbers of Asian elephants, swamp deer, and hog deer.

Kaziranga's marshy terrain and elephant grass thickets create habitat comparable to Africa's Serengeti, the abundance of large mammals earning it recognition as one of the world's premier wildlife destinations. The park stretches along the Brahmaputra's southern floodplain, seasonal flooding renewing grasslands that support this remarkable biodiversity.

Birdwatchers find Kaziranga equally rewarding—over 480 species recorded here include Oriental honey buzzard, black-shouldered kite, white-tailed eagle, and Himalayan griffon. The park's wetlands attract migratory waterfowl throughout winter months.

We return to the vessel for our final night aboard.

Overnight aboard ABN Sukapha.

Day 16 Silghat to Guwahati

After checking out from the cruise at Silghat this morning, we drive back to Guwahati, a journey of approximately three to four hours retracing our route along the Brahmaputra's southern bank. The drive provides final perspectives of rural Assam—rice paddies extending to horizons, roadside stalls selling seasonal fruits, occasional glimpses of the great river that has shaped this landscape for millennia.

Upon arrival in Guwahati we check into our hotel. The rest of the evening remains at leisure—opportunity to explore the city's markets, walk along the riverfront promenade, or simply rest after four days aboard the vessel. Guwahati's modern development contrasts sharply with the rural villages we've encountered upstream, the city's growth reflecting Assam's increasing economic importance and its role connecting India's remote northeastern states.

Overnight in Guwahati (dinner at the hotel).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Depart Guwahati

This morning we bid farewell and transfer to Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport for onward journeys. Our route has traced an arc from the Himalaya's heights to the plains where its waters flow—from Ladakh's Buddhist desert through Darjeeling's tea-covered slopes to the fertile abundance of the Brahmaputra valley. Each elevation revealed distinct cultures shaped by geography, the journey complete.

Bon Voyage - Juley (Ladakhi) - Bistrai jnuhos (Nepali) - Bhl thkibi (Assamese)!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast