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Travel

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Alternative India

Maybe you've already ticked Delhi and the Taj Mahal off your bucket list or just want an Indian holiday with a difference. *Alex Reynolds* suggest some desirable destinations off the tourist trail

IF YOU'RE BOLD ENOUGH to deviate from the masses darting between the Golden Triangle (Delhi, Agra and Jaipur), Varanasi and Goa, you can discover another side to India than the land you encounter on the tourist trail. In the lesser-travelled parts, people take you where you need to go with a smile; while you're shopping, locals will step in to help you get a good price; and food is much cheaper, and more authentic and downright delicious. The tricky part is deciding where to go. India's 36 states and territories offer a vast realm of unconventional travel opportunities. Here are some alternatives to tourist traps to guide you off the beaten track.

Instead of: Agra and the Taj Mahal in Uttar Pradesh

Visit: Palitana in Gujarat

More than 1,000 temples blanket the mountaintop of Palitana, the holiest pilgrimage place in the world for followers of Jainism, an ancient Indian religion. The Taj Mahal is undoubtedly iconic, but if you want something that will really take your breath away, try Palitana at sunrise. You have to climb steps for at least an hour and a half to get there but at least you won't have to queue up with hundreds of other tourists just to get a glimpse. Palitana is also the only legally vegetarian city on earth: it outlawed the buying and selling of animal products in 2014.

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You're so Jain Left: Palitana.
Above left: Loktak Lake.
Above right: Ahmedabad

Instead of: Jaipur, Rajasthan
Visit: Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Jaipur – the 'Pink City' – is pretty, but it's also the state's number one tourist destination. Rather than subject yourself to massive crowds and persistent hawkers, head south to Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat, Rajasthan's neighbour state. Grand havelis (lavishly painted mansions) and vivid textile markets line the streets of its recently Unesco-listed old city, while mind-boggling monuments such as the Rani ki Vav stepwell and the Sun Temple in Modhera are a day trip away. Then there's the food... Gujarati thalis are some of the most indulgent culinary experiences you can have in India. Despite all this, hardly any tourists make it to Gujarat. Their loss, your gain.



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Green scene Arunachal.
Below: Loktak Lake

Instead of: Himachal Pradesh
Visit: Arunachal Pradesh

Nothing says the Himalayas like hordes of stoned backpackers and selfie-happy domestic tourists. If that doesn't sound like your cup of tea, find your way to Arunachal Pradesh in north-east India, one of the country's least-visited states. Remote Arunachal borders China, and you'll need an (easily obtained) permit to enter. Once in, you'll have adventures through sprawling Himalayan vistas, experience dozens of distinct tribal cultures far removed from stereotypical India, and you'll never have to move over to avoid appearing in someone else's Instagram shot. Promise.



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Instead of: Alleppey backwaters in Kerala

Visit: Loktak Lake in Manipur

Alleppey's backwaters are serene but strained by too many visitors and tourist boats that dump refuse into them. Instead of contributing to this pollution problem, try Loktak Lake in Manipur, a north-eastern state bordering Myanmar. Here fishermen in wooden longboats drift slowly between buoyant islands of plants arranged into crop-circle-like fish farms. Spend your days boating around the lake or visiting Keibul Lamjao, the world's only floating national park, and save evenings for chatting with homestay hosts on the water's edge. ■

→ See more from Alex Reynolds at www.lostwithpurpose.com and @lostwithpurpose on Instagram

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