

CURRY FLAVOUR

The tastes of the
INDIAN
SUBCONTINENT
merit the trip alone

FACT FILE

The wonderful flavours of the Subcontinent can be sampled on any trip to the region and our specialists will be delighted to tell you about their favourite restaurants. If you want to try your hand at cookery there are a number of schools offering everything from half day demonstrations to a full week's intensive training. For further details please call our Indian Subcontinent specialists on 01869 276 218.



India's vast variety of landscapes and climatic zones have lead to a wealth of different dishes, from seafood in the coastal regions to mutton stews in the Himalayas. Each of the religions have their own cuisines and eating habits. We have mentioned a few here but as a visitor to India you will have the opportunity to try many more.

Most dishes will be unfamiliar to those used to the average British high street Indian restaurant menu, however, one style of cooking that you will recognise is the tandoori. The tandoor is a clay oven used in the northern regions of India in which meat marinated in yoghurt, spices and herbs is placed in the oven. Nan bread and roti, a flat bread, are baked by sticking them to the side wall of the oven. As wheat is more widely grown than rice in the north, breads are more likely to be served with meals. They are very good at soaking up the sauces and juices of the curry.

Although we always think of Indian food being highly spiced and consisting of many different ingredients, it is not always the case. Jains, followers of a religion which was formed as a breakaway from Hinduism, are very strict vegetarians. Traditionally their food contains no garlic or onion. For Hindus there are even different types of food specified for people of different castes.

The Sikhs, another group formed by those who wanted to differentiate themselves from Hinduism, use food as a way of bringing people together

whether rich or poor, man or woman. The Golden Temple in Amritsar, the most holy place for Sikhs, serves up to 10,000 meals a day in sittings which can have 3,000 people at a time. All the food is prepared by Sikh volunteers from all walks of life and, although a simple meal, it serves as a reminder that everyone should share and no one person is better than another.

If you are ever in central Mumbai around lunchtime, you may see the strange sight of 5,000 dhaba whallahs delivering 175,000 lunches. This incredible system involves wives or cooks preparing a meal at home in the suburbs, normally consisting of a meat and a vegetable curry plus rice or chappatti, and packing the different dishes into a three or four storey lunch box, known as a tiffin. It is then collected and taken by train to one of the two main stations in the city. From here it is redistributed into different areas of the city, carried by hand cart or on long trays on the head to the respective offices. This system is so efficient that it has been observed by American management consultancy firms! Having a hot, home cooked meal at lunchtime is seen as essential.

Snacks are prepared and eaten on all street corners and roadside stalls throughout India. Known locally as dhabas, they are the best place to sample chai masala. This life-giving brew is prepared by chai-whallahs who add milk and water to low grade tea and boil them up together. Spices, including ginger and cardamoms, are additional ingredients as well as copious

amounts of sugar. It is surprisingly refreshing and gives an instant energy boost.

In southern India, particularly Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the fresh king coconut prevails. On ordering one the vendor produces a machete, swipes the top off and puts in a straw – delicious and refreshing this is fast food at its fastest! Coconut is also widely used in curries, particularly the fish curries of the region. Popular breakfast dishes in southern India include the delicious Masala Dosa, a vegetable stuffed pancake and idli – steamed rice cakes which are dipped in a spicy gravy.

For those wishing to go a stage further and learn a few of the skills involved in preparing authentic Indian cuisine there are a number of excellent cookery schools dotted around the country. A wonderful place to learn more about the cooking techniques of the region is Ayesha Manzil. This colonial family home is situated in Northern Kerala near Telicherry which was once an important trading centre for Indian spices. The Malabar coastline provides fresh fish and shellfish in abundance. Locally grown fruits and spices are also easily accessible and feature prominently in local cuisine. During your stay your host Faiza will accompany you to the local markets to buy fresh fish, meat, spices and vegetables and will teach you how real Mopillah cuisine is created. A stay at Ayesha Manzil can easily be incorporated into a trip to Southern India or could form the basis of your entire trip.

1 Moosa and Faiza at Ayesha Manzil, Tellicherry.

2 Jackfruit makes a delicious curry.

3 Chillis at the market.



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Five of the Best

Debate, argument, press-ganging, in fact everything short of physical violence, led to our team of Subcontinent specialists finally reaching a degree of consensus on the list below.

MALABAR HOUSE, COCHIN

The prawn curry at the Malabar House in Cochin is legendary. The hotel is owned and managed by a European couple: Joerg is German and his wife is Spanish so the food is often a combination of Indian and Western dishes. The small courtyard restaurant is very romantic.

CHHATRA SAGAR, NIMAJ

Chhatra Sagar serves genuine home cooked Rajasthani dishes using locally grown ingredients. Tomatoes in a spicy cream sauce, lightly curried sangria, a tree-grown vegetable that resembles French beans, and gourd (marrow) in aromatic gravy are some of the sabzi or vegetable dishes.

These are served with a selection of roti, either baked with home grown maize or lentil flour, to mop up all the juices. You dine alfresco on a dam overlooking a glorious lake.

KYBER RESTAURANT, MUMBAI

The Kyber Restaurant in Mumbai has had a great reputation for decades for its range of fantastic northern Indian Mughlai cuisine, from tender kebabs to delicious paneer shashlik – cubes of Indian cottage cheese with spices and vegetables. The gulab jamun, which is not dissimilar to a sweet mini-doughnut, with pistachio curd is an excellent way of finishing off the meal.

DWARIKAS, KATHMANDU, NEPAL

For the best Newari food in Kathmandu, try the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarikas' Hotel. Dishes include mouth-watering dal – a lentil curry flavoured with Himalayan spices – and a spicy aubergine curry served in a historic and beautiful setting.

KIRCHHAYN BUNGALOW, SRI LANKA

For those who want to really get into the local way of life, curry for breakfast is a good way to do it. A traditional Sri Lankan breakfast dish is hoppers – a type of crispy pancake made from rice flour and coconut milk – served with chicken curry. Kirchhayn Bungalow, surrounded by hillsides covered in tea, has the preparation down to a fine art.

