

MANY FORMS, ONE TRUTH
The Golden Temple in Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe, Karnataka

APARNA NORI

●●● TRAVEL | BUDDHIST TRAIL

Walking WITH THE BUDDHA

Travelling the paths of Dharma from Bodh Gaya to the Himalayas

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HE WHO IS YET TO COME
A statue of Maitreya Buddha at Diskit Monastery, Ladakh

Mark Twain famously said that when it came to religion, India was the only millionaire; all other countries were paupers in comparison. Even so, Buddhism holds a special place in India's immense spiritual wealth. Even today, there are dozens of Buddhist sites that are scattered across the country. From the fragile ruins of Ajanta and Nalanda, to the stunning mountainside monasteries of Ladakh and Sikkim, India is truly the blessed land where Buddhism was born—and where it still thrives.

In India, wherever Buddhism is still practised as a religion and a way of life, most follow the

Himalayan—and particularly, Tibetan—school of thought. This is not surprising, for India became home to the 14th Dalai Lama in 1959, after he was forced to flee Tibet. And so, in our trek through Buddhism's glorious past, it is only fair to begin with Mcleodganj in Himachal Pradesh.

Mcleodganj is home to Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama. This small town in the shadow of the Dhauladhar Mountains is also effectively home to the Tibetan government-in-exile, and the spiritual hub of Tibetan Buddhism in India, earning it the moniker of 'Little Lhasa'. Among the thousands of displaced Tibetans who live here—the Dalai Lama's followers—are hundreds of practising

monks and nuns. Also known as Upper Dharamsala, the tourist highlights of Mcleodganj include the Thekchen Choling complex comprising the Tsuglagkhang temple, the Namgyal monastery and the Dalai Lama's private residence.

In the valley of Dharamsala, the population is mostly Indian. Nonetheless, this place is also home to the Norbulingka Institute, which was created with the specific aim of preserving Tibetan art and culture. With a fascinating museum and active craft workshops, Norbulingka is one of the Tibetan community's tenuous links to its heritage.

Down south, in the plains of Karnataka, lies another major hub of the Tibetan community in India. Bylakuppe is home to over 70,000 people, nearly 5,000 of them monks and nuns. The beating heart of Bylakuppe is the Namdroling monastery, which was established by Pema Norbu Rinpoche, and consecrated and named by the Dalai Lama. Namdroling is home to the impressive Golden temple with its three gold-plated Buddha statues, as well as the Zangdogpalri temple.

ALAMY



THE PAST AS PRESENT

A Buddhist monastery near Gangtok, Sikkim

As the birthplace of Buddhism, India is also home to a number of sites that mark the beginnings of the faith. A list of these sites would include both those associated with Gautama Buddha's life, and those constructed after his *parinirvana*, to preserve and spread his teachings.

It is said that over two-and-a-half millennia ago, Prince Siddhartha Gautama sat under a Bodhi tree and attained enlightenment, thus becoming the wise and compassionate Gautama Buddha. It is only to be expected, then, that Bodh Gaya would be one of the premier Buddhist pilgrimage destinations in India, attracting visitors from all over the world. Tourists and pilgrims on this quest find their journey's end at the UNESCO world heritage Mahabodhi temple. In front of the temple grows a peepal tree that the faithful venerate as a descendant of the original Bodhi tree under which the troubled Siddhartha attained his enlightenment.

Sarnath, close to Varanasi, is famously known as the spot where the Buddha preached his first sermon. In the 3rd century BC, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, who had converted to the non-violent path that Buddha revealed, caused several stupas and monasteries to be constructed in this place, to commemorate the event.

The highlight for travellers to Sarnath is undoubtedly the cylindrical Dhamekh Stupa, mounted on a circular base that is carved with intricate geometric and floral patterns. Perhaps more recognisably, the famous column topped by four lions facing the cardinal directions—which is the inspiration for India's official emblem—is preserved inside the Sarnath Archaeological Museum too.

Easily reachable via a day trip from the major tourist destinations of Mysore and Coorg, Bylakuppe welcomes both Indian and international travellers.

Another eminent site of Tibetan Buddhism in India is Ladakh (from the word 'La-Dags' or 'Land of high mountain passes'). Although Ladakh is technically part of Jammu & Kashmir, it is really a world of its own, far removed from the main state in terms of both physical access and spiritual makeup.

Ladakhi Buddhists also follow the Yellow Hat (*Gelugpa*) order of Tibetan Buddhism, and venerate the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader.

This high altitude desert is home to some of India's most spectacular monasteries, from the touristy Thiksey (modelled after Tibet's great Potala Palace) to isolated Phugtal, as well as the 11th century Lamayuru, Ladakh's oldest monastery. The best time to visit Ladakh is during one of the monastery festivals, when monks perform colourful masked dances and the monastery's most precious *thangka* paintings are unveiled (the Hemis festival, usually held in late June/early July is a favourite for tourists).

After Ladakh, it is Sikkim that is home to the greatest concentration of prominent Buddhist monasteries in India. Locals believe that this region

was blessed by Guru Padmasambhava himself, who found his way here during his travels in the 8th century.

The sprawling, mid-18th century monastery at Rumtek attained prominence as the spiritual seat (in exile) of the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, who fled Tibet around the same time as the Dalai Lama. Now known as the Rumtek Dharma Chakra Centre, this is a popular pilgrimage and tourism destination, close to Gangtok.

The Pemayangtse monastery, near Pelling in West Sikkim, predates Rumtek, and has a sublime hilltop location, with clear views of the Khanchendzonga range. Further north, at an altitude of over 17,000 feet, is Gurudongmar lake. Apart from being compellingly picturesque, the lake is deemed sacred, and was also consecrated by Guru Padmasambhava himself. Apart from the centuries-old temples and monasteries in this place, Sikkim also boasts the tallest statue of Guru Padmasambhava in the world. This 138-foot-tall statue, atop Samdruptse hill near Namchi in the southern part of the state, was opened to visitors in 2004.

If it is these seats of Himalayan Tibetan Buddhism that are important for the present and future of this faith, then it is important to also acknowledge the sites which provide a glimpse into India's rich Buddhist heritage.

An Eightfold Path

1. Ajanta-Ellora Caves, Maharashtra

Ellora comprises 34 Buddhist, Hindu and Jain cave temples built between the 6th and 10th century CE. Ajanta is believed to be much older, the earliest from 2nd century BCE

2. Tawang Monastery, Arunachal Pradesh

The *gompa* (monastery) at Tawang is considered to be the largest in India. Like many other Buddhist monasteries, it has a superb hill-top location and is home to more than 450 monks



ANEESH BHASIM

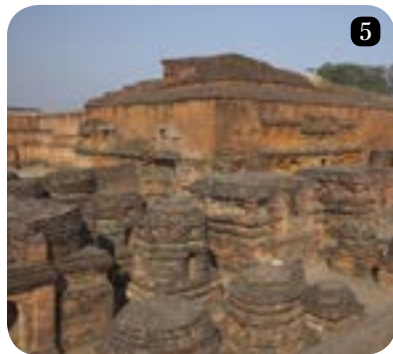
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PANKAJ TIWARI



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3. Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh

This site found prominence thanks to Acharya Nagarjuna in the 2nd century CE. Artefacts from the original site have been reassembled in a museum on an island in the manmade Nagarjunsagar lake

4. Sanchi Stupa, Madhya Pradesh

The Sanchi Mahastupa is believed to be the oldest surviving stone structure in India. It was built by Emperor Ashoka, in the 3rd century BCE, to preserve the relics of the Buddha and his main followers



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5. Nalanda University, Bihar

The world's oldest university (dating back to the 5th century), Nalanda was always a great seat of learning, even during the lifetime of Gautama Buddha

6. Tabo Monastery, Himachal Pradesh

Nestled in the craggy mountains at Spiti in Himachal Pradesh, and established more than a millennium ago, Tabo is the oldest continuously functioning Buddhist monastery in India



7. Mahaparinirvana Temple, Uttar Pradesh

Kushinagar is where the Buddha attained *mahaparinirvana*. The Buddha Marg contains many stupas commemorating his life and death, including the Mahaparinirvana temple

8. Ratnagiri-Udaygiri-Lalitgiri, Odisha

Excavations at these three ancient Buddhist sites close to Cuttack have revealed the existence of massive monastic settlements. The region was once a hub for Mahayana Buddhism and is rich in rock-cut sculptures and elegantly carved stupas

