

Kolkatta

The largest metropolis in India, Calcutta is a vibrant city on the move, volatile and unpredictable. The Gateway to India, till 1912, and the capital of the Raj in India, it still bears the Victorian imprint on its streets and structures. A city just about ready to burst at the seams, Calcutta is home to more than 10 million people. It is the commercial nerve-centre of the East, with major industrial plants, textile mills and corporate units. Regal edifices, grubby alleys, bustling bazaars, elegant hotels, people from all walks of life - Calcutta has it all.

The city is a hub of fervent activity in the realms of music, theatre, arts, and sports. Calcutta has always prided itself on the many luminaries it has sent forth, be it Tagore, Satyajit Ray, or Mrinal Sen. The intense dedication to the arts manifests itself in a plethora of festivals, dance, music performances and other cultural events. The Calcuttans are also famous for their all-consuming passion for sports, especially, football and cricket.

Calcutta is a city of baffling paradoxes, a city that leaves its stamp on one's mind ... forever.

As one enters the city of Calcutta, the impressive Howrah Bridge across the Hooghly river, a huge cantilever structure, supported by two 270 feet high piers, greets the eye. Forming the green heart of the city is the great stretch of lawns called the Maidan, fringed on one side by the river, and on the other by an elegant boulevard, the Chowringhee. The Maidan is the venue for an assortment of events, ranging from football matches to political rallies. The grounds are also aptly, referred to as the 'lungs of the city.'

Surrounding the lawns are a number of famous landmarks. At the southern end is the Victoria Memorial, an imposing white marble edifice, a museum housing the relics of the British Empire . The Memorial which took 15 years to build, also has an Art Gallery within. At the northern end is the Ochterlony Monument, a 48 metre high column , now known as the Shahid Minar. Just adjacent to it, are the Eden Gardens, with a picturesque lake and a quaint Burmese pagoda. The world - renown Eden Gardens Stadium is also located in this area. The Birla Planetarium, one of the largest in the world, is placed at the southern end of the vast Maidan, alongwith the Zoological Gardens.

The many museums in the city, pay testimony to the cultural richness of India's heritage. The Indian Museum, one of the largest of its kind in India, housing relics of ancient civilizations, and an art gallery is located in Chowringhee. The Academy of Fine Arts, Nehru Childrens Museum, Netaji Museum, Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, Rabindra Bharati Museum and the Ashutosh Museum of Indian Art are some of the museums that contain invaluable and rare objects of art.

Calcutta also has shrines and sites of worship belonging to all faiths. The Armenian Church (1650), at Brabourne Road, is one of the oldest churches in the city. The massive Nakhoda Mosque or Rabindra Sarani, modelled after Akbar's mausoleum in Sikandra, is said to accommodate 10,000 people at a time. 10 kms from the city is Belur Math, the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission which propagates the neo-Vedantic movement. It has been built to resemble a temple, a church and mosque.

Located 8 kms from Calcutta on the west bank of Ganga are the famous Botanical Gardens. The highlight of the Gardens is the 200 year old banyan tree, said to be the largest in the world. The tree is 26 metres high with a circumference of approximately 900 feet. The world's largest estuarine forest in the world, the Sunderbans, the habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger, which also houses the estuarine crocodile, wild boar and several varieties of birds and snakes, is within easy reach of Calcutta. This famous Project Tiger Reserve can be approached only via the waterways.

185 km south east of Calcutta is Digha, a popular beach resort with a 6 km long beach, said to be one of the widest in the world. The other popular beach resort of West Bengal, Bakkhali, lies 132 km from the city. 48 km south of Calcutta is the beautiful Diamond Harbour, at the mouth of the Hooghly, an ideal picnic spot. 12 km from the city centre, on the banks of the Ganga, is the magnificent Dakshineswar Temple, dedicated to Goddess Kali . 136 km from the city is the one - of - its - kind university of Shantiniketan, the brainchild of the revered Rabindranath Tagore. Started as an experimental open air classroom, this university has emerged as a universal centre of knowledge and academic excellence, for students and scholars alike.

The one event that all of Calcutta anticipates, with a great deal of zest, is the Durga Puja (in the month of October) - when the city seems to don a brilliant garb of vitality and festivity, an atmosphere of bonhomie, that carries on through Christmas and the New Year. During the 10 day Pooja, the Goddess Durga is worshipped, her statuesque images are created, and millions of pandals all over the city come alive to the thunderous and rousing beat of drums. Basant Utsav, Saraswati Pooja and Holi are the other festivals that are celebrated with fervour.