

TRAVEL. ENJOY. RESPECT.



A rising number of tourists want to responsibly experience the sights and sounds of the places they visit and leave a positive impact on the local communities. In response, several states have begun promoting ecotourism, with public and private organisations chipping in as well. Here is a look at where you can travel responsibly to.

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KERALA
Thenmala, Kollam district

Developed as India's first planned ecotourism destination, Thenmala, translating to 'Honey Hill', is replete with lush forests and various species of fauna. The Nakshatravanam is a garden showcasing 27 varieties of trees, each having a certain medicinal or aesthetic value, which are associated with the 27 constellations. The Butterfly Safari Park here is home to more than 150 butterfly species, including the endemic Tailed Jay and the seasonal Crimson Rose. Guided trails provide visitors the opportunity to see butterflies in various stages of their metamorphosis in microhabitats with special roosting and host plants for caterpillars. The Deer Rehabilitation Centre was established for deer who strayed out of their natural habitat. A riverside trek affords visitors the opportunity to catch sight of several deer species such as sambar, spotted deer and barking deer.

thenmalaecotourism.com

The adjacent Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary offers guided treks through semi-evergreen forests housing sambar, elephants and butterflies. An overnight trip gives visitors the opportunity to experience the wilderness at night.

Stay Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary offers jungle camping options in Idimuzhangan and Woody Rockwood camps. shendurney.com

The stairs pictured here lead to Nakshatravanam, the garden of 27 trees, where each tree is associated with one of the 27 *nakshatras* (birth stars). Tourists can ascertain their birth-star associated tree and purchase saplings of the same as souvenirs.

Image Thenmala Ecotourism

NAGALAND
Dzuleke and Khonoma,
Kohima district

Home to the Angami tribe, the villages of Dzuleke and Khonoma are known for their focus on community living and sustainable lifestyle.

In 2014, North East Initiative Development Agency (NEIDA), a non-profit organisation, stepped in (with funding from the Tata Trusts) to help Dzuleke village promote agrotourism. From providing training in setting up homestays to conducting English classes, NEIDA aims to ensure that the locals benefit from tourism while the heritage of the region is preserved. For instance, the Trout Breeding and Conservation Centre focuses on breeding of several species of trout found in Nagaland's rivers. Visitors participate in experiential farming programmes such as harvesting vegetables alongside local farmers and working in the paddy fields.

Khonoma was amongst the earliest places in India to focus on conservation, enacting a ban on hunting and logging in the '90s, following it up with a ban on tobacco and single-use plastic in recent times. Homestays with village families allow visitors to engage in local community activities and sample traditional Angami cuisine such as freshwater crabs with chilli chutney and aromatic Binni rice. neida.org.in, tourism.nagaland.gov.in
Stay Wonder Nagaland runs a network of homestays in Dzuleke and Khonoma.

The Dzukou Valley near Khonoma is a boon for trekkers; between June and September, the landscape is covered with fuchsia-coloured Dzukou lilies, eye-catching lavender and myriad colours of euphorbia.



1. Learn how to weave a Chakhesang shawl on the traditional backstrap loom from a local at Dzuleke. **Image** NEIDA **2.** A guest with the host of Anisie Homestay at Dzuleke. **Image** NEIDA



Elephants passing through the safe passage created by Bodosa on his three-hectare tea garden.
Image Niraj Mani Chourasia

ASSAM Tenzing Bodosa Organic Tea Garden, Udalguri district

Assam's tea has been internationally renowned since the British Raj, but few are aware that the spread of tea cultivation has affected the state's other jewel, its elephant population. Tea gardens use deep drainage ditches, pesticides and electric fences, all of which can grievously injure the elephants that may lumber into the plantations. Assamese farmer Tenzing Bodosa (*pictured here with his family*) is attempting to mitigate some of the damage done, by forgoing deadly ditches, electric fences and pesticides, and allowing elephants to pass freely through his

tea garden. Bodosa has also planted bamboos and other trees popular with elephants on the perimeter of his farm and is training other tea growers in elephant-friendly farming practices.

Visitors can enjoy close encounters with pachyderms that pass through it, along with volunteering at the tea garden, sampling different varieties of tea and enjoying the natural beauty of the surroundings through short hikes and boating experiences. **Stay** Bodosa's tea garden provides accommodation options. facebook.com/bodosa.tea

Wildlife Friendly Enterprise Network strives to conserve threatened wildlife in wild places and on agricultural lands by certifying enterprises. It has certified the tea produced at Tenzing Bodosa's plantation as Elephant Friendly Tea. In the months to follow, they aim to add more tea gardens across India in the programme that provides ecotourism and volunteering opportunities. For updates, see elephantfriendlytea.com



Lisa Mills



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UTTARAKHAND Garhwal district

Focus on community has always been at the heart of Garhwal's villages and is now being furthered by organisations such as Green People, which have taken up village communities for sustainable development. At Green People's quaintly named The Goat Village, situated en route the Nag Tibba trek, travellers can stay in cosy cottages decorated by village artisans with locally available materials. Home cooks prepare Garhwali dishes such as *mandua ki roti* (made of finger millet) and *kandali ka saag* (nettle leaves), and local guides escort visitors on treks that enable them

to take in the rugged landscape. The organisation has also introduced the Bakri Chhap label, which provides market linkage to indigenous farm produce from the community. thegoatvillage.com

Tour operators such as Fernweh Fair Travel offer opportunities to learn basket weaving, cooking and yoga in the lap of the Himalayas, while staying in homestays and lending a hand to the locals.

fernweh-travel.com

Stay Book a traditional homestay on the hills at The Goat Village or book any of the immersive trips run by Fernweh Fair Travel.

In February 2017, the Green People organised a quirky event, Bakri Swayamwar (goat marriage), to promote awareness on gene pool evolution amongst goat herders. Now an annual affair, the Swayamwar has benefited the community.

1. Start your day with a yoga session against the backdrop of the Himalayas at The Goat Village's homestays. **Image** Prasad Chaoji 2. Feast on traditional home-cooked Garhwali food in the company of the locals. **Image** Jai Pandya 3. Locals participating in the quirky Bakri Swayamwar event in the village. **Image** Prakhar Saraswat



Karnataka Hampi

To balance the effects of the onrush of tourism in the capital of the erstwhile Vijayanagara Empire, organisations such as the Kishkinda Trust have initiated volunteer tourism activities in Hampi and its sister town, Anegundi. Travellers can volunteer for organic farming in Anegundi or working with female artisans to create products using locally available materials such as banana fibre and water hyacinth grass. People can also participate in architectural restoration and conservation of heritage homes in Anegundi, as well as its photo documentation. tktkishkinda.org

LADAKH Spiti Valley

Steeped in spirituality and surrounded by towering snow-capped mountains, sustainability has long been a way of life for the residents of the once-remote valley of Spiti. Responsible travel is fast becoming a mantra here, as efforts are on to prevent overtourism from damaging the mountains. Volunteer travel serves as a good way to experience various facets of life in the mountains. Visitors can stay in a monastery with Buddhist monks and help out in daily activities or can engage in building a greenhouse with

local communities for growing vegetables. Homestays run by locals offer intimate ways to experience the culture and hospitality, along with opportunities to learn about local flavours and traditional handicrafts such as *thangkas* (silk paintings) and *zama* (pottery). **Stay Ecosphere Spiti** spitiecosphere.com offers travel packages and stay options in homestays across Spiti. The Key Monastery and Tabo Monastery offer rooms on sharing basis. 📍



GETTING THERE

AirAsia India flies to Srinagar, New Delhi, Kochi, Imphal and Guwahati from various destinations. airasia.com

1. Participate at Spiti Ecosphere's volunteer-run cafe to engage with and be of assistance to the locals. 2. Offer to teach at a local school and spread the light of knowledge. Pictured here, a teacher volunteer. 3. A tourist lends a hand in the construction of a greenhouse in the valley. Images Ecosphere

