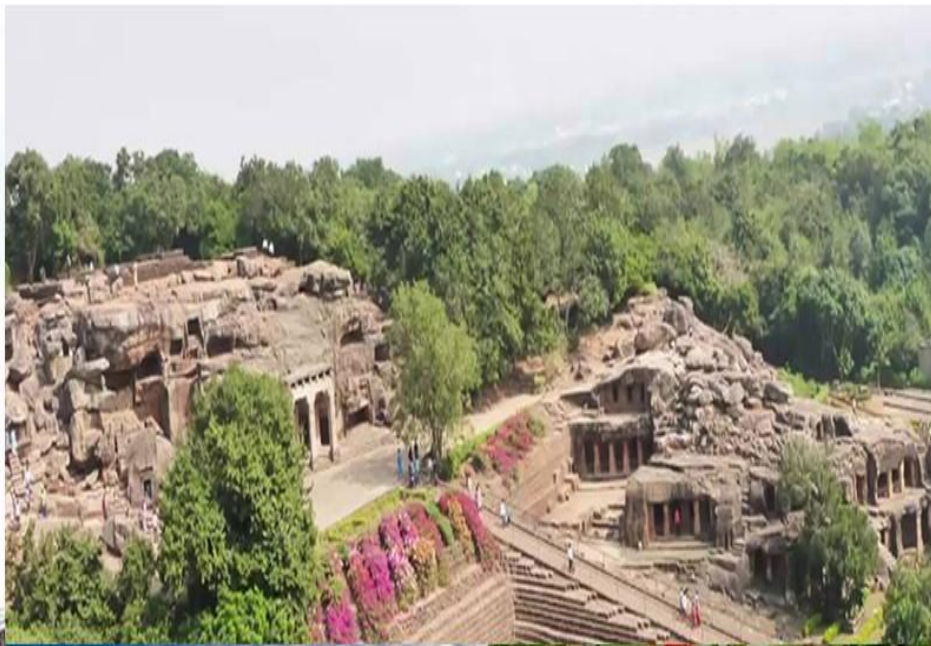


ODISHA TOURISM



A Journey in Enticing Odisha

India is a country simply brimming with amazing places to discover, but amongst the most incredible destinations is Odisha in the country's east near the Bay of Bengal. For adventurous tourists, Odisha – known as Orissa until 2011 – offers an enticing blend of activities including wildlife safaris, stunning hikes, and beautiful historical temples.

Odisha, located to the south of the West Bengali province, has a long and intriguing history as well as a rich and vibrant modern culture. It is mentioned in history books that are well over two thousand years old, meaning it is a place with a long and fascinating back story, yet today is a vibrant and exciting destination that is developing rapidly.

Each year, Odisha tourism becomes more popular as more and more visitors arrive to soak in the incredible sights of the region, from the stunning countryside landscapes to the bustling cities.

Today, there are many incredible sights where visitors can learn about Odisha's fascinating history. Some of the very oldest sights in the region include the rock paintings of Gudahandi, which are thought to be more than 20,000 years old. To walk within these caves is to truly walk in the footsteps of our most distant ancestors.

This is because the site is evidence of some of the oldest origins of mankind, and to visit them as tourists to Odisha is to truly get a feel for the thousands of years of history that cloak the region.

Other incredible historic sites are somewhat more recent but no less impressive – such as the stunning Konark Sun Temple, which is famous worldwide for its stunning architecture. Built in the 13th Century, although some parts of the temple are now in ruins, many of the most beautiful and intricate carvings and areas are still preserved.

All in all, Odisha is a vibrant, exciting place where there is a strong emphasis on spirituality and history. Those who visit the region are sure to be richly rewarded by knowledge, adventure and warm hospitality.

To further appreciate the history of Odisha in days gone by, a visit to the capital of Bhubaneswar is a must. Legend has it that Bhubaneswar was once home to more than one thousand temples, earning it the nickname of 'The City of Temples'. Today, there may not be one thousand temples remaining, but those that do stand are sure to delight visitors.

One of the oldest of them all is the stunning 11th Century Lingaraja Temple, which is dedicated to the Hindu God of Shiva and is one of the oldest temples in the entire Odisha state. Standing at more than 55m high, it is an impressive structure that blends beautifully with its natural surroundings. Every day, thousands of visitors view the temple, with many Hindus worshipping at the site.

Other temples in the city, including the Ananta Vasudeva Temple devoted to Krishna and Rajarani Temple, are equally impressive sights to explore and enjoy.

To go even further back in time in Bhubaneswar, it is worth visiting the sites of Khandagiri and Udayagiri, located about 8km from the city centre. Here, there are many caves built in

approximately the 2nd Century BCE, which feature incredible remnants of civilisation from days gone by. Within them, you can be transported back in time by the sight of ancient structures and carvings which remain well-preserved within the caves' walls.

As well as the impressive historical sites, Bhubaneshwar boasts much more for the intrepid adventurer to enjoy while visiting Orissa. Simply meandering amongst the maze of streets, dotted with everything from beautiful temples to tempting restaurants, is a wonderful way to spend an afternoon or more.

Those who love to shop will be spoiled for choice in Bhubaneshwar, which a hub for traditional arts and crafts. One of the most amazing experiences of Odisha tourism is exploring the incredible arts and crafts sold by vendors in the region, many of which are made from using traditional methods.

In particular, the city is a wonderful place to purchase goods including beautiful stone carving and exquisite silver filigree jewellery. If you are looking for luxurious yet affordable souvenirs of your trip to Odisha, it is worth stopping and browsing the many galleries and shops devoted to traditional crafts.

Another famous destination within the state of Odisha is Puri, which similarly offers an impressive selection of temples and other attractions for visitors to enjoy.

Amongst the many temples in the town of Puri is the Shree Jagannath Puri Temple, which was constructed in the 11th Century and is today one of the most sacred sites for Hindus. In July, the Temple is the sight of the significant Rath Yatra festival, which attracts Hindus from all over the world for several days of worship and revelling.

While Shree Jagannath Puri may be the most famous temple, there are many more for travellers to visit and enjoy, including the Mausima Temple and the Chakra Tirtha Temple.

Once visitors have enjoyed several of the beautiful temples and other attractions, it is worth exploring the wider area and becoming acquainted with the local wildlife. One of the most amazing places to visit is the Satapada Dolphin Sanctuary which is located about 50km from Puri.

Here, visitors can learn about and view the charismatic Irrawaddy Dolphins which inhabit the area. To get up close to these beautiful sea mammals, travellers can ride on a power-driven boat in search of the dolphins. Given that this region, Chilika, is home to the most Irrawaddy dolphins in the world, your chances of seeing one are very good.

Viewing dolphins is not the only attraction near the Chilika Lake. The area is a heaven for adventure lovers, with activities including kayaking, canoeing, bird watching and boating. Those visitors to Chilika can even venture out to the island of Rajahamsa, which is a simple yet beautiful island perfect for a relaxing day trip.

Another main attraction is wildlife tourism in Odisha, which offers incredible opportunities to meet indigenous animals. Beyond Lake Chilika with its playful dolphins and array of birdlife, the Simlipal National Park is home to many gorgeous Indian elephants as well as natural sights

including graceful waterfalls. Similarly, Bhitarkanika National Park is an incredible place to see an array of animals in the wild.

To meet some different animals, consider a visit to Bhitarkanika Wetland which is also within the Odisha tourism area, covering more than 650 square kilometres. The Wetland is home to some slightly more intimidating creatures, including some prehistoric-looking saltwater crocodiles, jackals and hyenas.

A final popular place to discover the wildlife of the Odisha region is at the Nandankanan Zoo, which covers almost one thousand acres of land. Within the expansive park, visitors can view over 1,500 animals from the critically endangered white tiger through to other species such as the unique pangolins and imposing Himalayan Bears. The zoo is widely considered one of the best in India, where animals are well-cared for and protected.

Tourism in Odisha is certainly an opportunity to share culture, not only by allowing visitors to learn more about the history and wildlife of the region but also by exposing them to modern life. In order to understand and experience local life in Odisha, a visit to the more regional areas in the state is highly recommended.

In smaller towns such as Raghurajpur, visitors will be warmly welcomed by the local residents, who will be glad to share their culture as well as traditional arts and crafts which make wonderful souvenirs. The regions of Odisha are home to many different ethnic groups including the Kondhs, Barogadaba and Dongarias, and it is a privilege to learn about these groups and their traditions.

One of the best things about tourism in Odisha is it gives you the opportunity to escape the endless hustle and bustle of India's busy cities and instead lay back and enjoy the serenity of the country's quieter parts. Amongst these is beautiful Ratnagiri, which is home to a stunning ancient Buddhist monastery as well as expansive views which showcase the region's natural beauty. It is a wonderful place to escape everyday life's hectic pace and instead enjoy the beautiful sights of Odisha.

Finally, one of the greatest attractions of tourism in Odisha is the chance to enjoy one of the region's many stunning beaches, which are great for swimming, surfing or simply relaxing by the shore. Some beaches, such as Chandrabhaga Beach, have great cultural and religious significance, while others are simply relaxing places to spend a day.

Of these relaxing beaches, some of the most enticing include peaceful Beleswar Beach or Paradeep Beach, or perhaps Rushikulya, which is paradise not only for its human visitors but for the turtles who sometimes travel its shores.

All in all, Odisha tourism offers so much to those who seek spiritual fulfilment, beautiful landscapes and rich cultural sites. Whether it is dipping your toes in the blue seas of the coast or walking in the footsteps of thousands of years of history at one of the many temples, Odisha is a destination that is sure to inspire and intrigue.