

Indian Festivals & Customs Guide

What major Indian festivals involve and how to take part respectfully if your trip lines up with one — a quick reference for curious travelers.

PLANNING AROUND THE FESTIVAL CALENDAR

India's festival calendar is dense and varies by region, religion, and the lunar calendar, so dates shift year to year. Traveling during a major festival can be a highlight of a trip — but it also means crowds, closures, and a different rhythm to daily life. This guide covers what to expect around a few of the most prominent festivals visitors are likely to encounter.

DIWALI

The festival of lights, among the most widely celebrated festivals across India.

- Expect homes, shops, and public spaces decorated with lights and lamps (diyas) over several days
- Firecrackers are traditional in many places, though restrictions vary by city and year — expect noise in the evenings
- Many businesses close or operate on reduced hours around the main Diwali day
- Gift-giving (sweets, dried fruit, small items) between friends, family, and business contacts is common around this time
- Falls in autumn (Oct–Nov) on a date set by the lunar calendar, making it one of the busiest travel periods of the year

HOLI

The spring festival of colors, widely known internationally for its color-throwing.

- Expect to be invited to throw or be covered in colored powder (gula) if you're out in public during the festival, especially in North India
- Wear clothes you don't mind staining permanently — the colors don't always wash out
- Some Holi celebrations involve bhang (a cannabis-infused drink or sweet) — be aware before accepting anything offered
- It's fine to politely decline participating if you'd rather watch from the side
- Falls in early spring (Feb–Mar) on a date set by the lunar calendar — book accommodation early if traveling during it

GENERAL FESTIVAL ETIQUETTE

- Dress modestly and follow local cues even at festivals that feel informal or celebratory
- Major festivals can mean reduced transport availability and fully booked accommodation — book ahead if your trip overlaps with one
- If invited to join a family's celebration, bringing a small gift of sweets is a thoughtful gesture
- Ask before photographing private rituals or family celebrations, even in public spaces
- Regional festivals (Pongal, Onam, Durga Puja, Baisakhi, and many others) are just as significant locally as the national ones, even if less known internationally

Exact festival dates shift each year with the lunar calendar — confirm dates for your travel year before finalizing your itinerary.