

Vegetarian & Vegan Travel in India Guide

Why India is one of the easiest countries in the world for vegetarians, and what vegans specifically should know about dairy, ghee, and hidden ingredients.

WHY THIS GUIDE

India is genuinely one of the friendliest countries on earth for vegetarians, but vegan travelers face a different reality — dairy (ghee, paneer, cream) is woven into a huge amount of everyday cooking, even in dishes that look plant-based. This guide separates what's easy from what needs a specific ask, for both diets.

WHAT TO EXPECT AS A VEGETARIAN

Vegetarian food in India isn't a special accommodation — it's mainstream.

- Pure vegetarian restaurants are common and clearly labeled, especially in regions like Gujarat and Rajasthan
- Most restaurant menus have a substantial, clearly marked vegetarian section, not a token dish or two
- Thali meals (a multi-dish plate) are often vegetarian by default in many regions and a good way to sample a wide range of dishes at once
- Street food has excellent vegetarian options, though apply the same hygiene caution you would for any street food
- Train and airline meals typically offer a vegetarian option as standard, not as a special request

WHAT VEGANS NEED TO ASK ABOUT SPECIFICALLY

The challenge for vegans is less about variety and more about hidden dairy.

- Ghee (clarified butter) is used widely in cooking, including in many dishes that otherwise look vegetable-based — ask specifically if ghee or butter was used
- Paneer (a fresh cheese) is a staple protein in vegetarian cooking and easy to mistake for tofu — confirm before ordering
- Cream and yogurt are common finishing touches in curries and are easy to miss on a menu description
- Sweets (mithai) are almost always dairy-based — look specifically for vegan-labeled sweets rather than assuming
- Learn a couple of key phrases for "no dairy, no ghee, no butter" in the local language of the region you're visiting — English alone may not get the message across to kitchen staff
- South Indian cuisine (idli, dosa, sambar) tends to be more naturally vegan-friendly than North Indian cuisine, which leans more heavily on dairy

Ingredient practices vary by region, restaurant, and even individual cook — always confirm directly rather than assuming a dish is vegan because it looks plant-based.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR BOTH DIETS

- Learn the words for your dietary needs in Hindi and the regional language of where you're traveling — it travels further than English in smaller towns

- Hotels catering to international travelers are generally well set up for vegetarian and vegan requests with advance notice
- Carry a few familiar snacks for long travel days when options may be limited
- Jain travelers or anyone avoiding root vegetables (onion, garlic) should specify this clearly too — it's a well-understood dietary category in India
- Lentils (dal), chickpeas, and a wide range of vegetables form the backbone of Indian home cooking — there's rarely a shortage of naturally plant-based options to ask for