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# Visiting Kolkata

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## Introduction

Kolkata, often referred to as the cultural capital of India, is a city that exudes a unique charm and dynamism. Steeped in history and vibrant culture, Kolkata offers a blend of the old and the new, with its colonial-era architecture standing proudly alongside modern urbanity. As the capital city of West Bengal, Kolkata is a key center for art, literature, and education, boasting an intellectual legacy that stretches back centuries. This book aims to serve as your comprehensive guide to navigating the wonders of Kolkata as a tourist.

Originally founded as an East India Company trading post, Kolkata was the center of the British Raj until the year 1911. This colonial past is evident today in the city's stunning Victorian structures, which are now interspersed with bustling markets, bustling street life, and gleaming high-rises. Whether you're strolling through the historic lanes of North Kolkata or enjoying the immaculate expanse of the Maidan, the city calls to history buffs and culture enthusiasts alike.

Kolkata is synonymous with festivals, none more grand than Durga Puja, a spectacle that transforms the city into a vibrant celebration of devotion, artistry, and community spirit. However, the city's cultural richness is evident year-round with its renowned literary festivals, music performances, and traditional dance recitals—making it a must-visit for those interested in exploring the fabric of Indian arts and culture.

As you navigate through Kolkata, you'll be entranced by its culinary delights. The city is a haven for food lovers, offering an array of traditional Bengali cuisine that promises to be a treat to your palate. From the spicy and savory delights of iconic street food to the sweet indulgences of Bengali sweets, Kolkata's culinary scene is a vibrant tapestry that is sure to leave a lasting impression.

Moreover, Kolkata's diversity extends beyond its gastronomy into its bustling markets that offer everything from textiles and handicrafts to books and souvenirs. Whether you're making your way through the historic New Market or exploring the lanes of Gariahat, shopping in Kolkata is an experience that promises surprises at every corner.

Lastly, this guide will equip you with practical tips on how to make the most of your visit, ensuring that you remain safe, connected, and aware of the local customs and etiquette. As you turn these pages, you'll discover not just a destination, but a living canvas that captures the essence of India's past and future—a city that beckons travelers with tales untold and experiences unparalleled.

## CHAPTER ONE: Getting There

Kolkata, nestled in the eastern part of India, isn't exactly a remote outpost tucked away from the world. It's a major metropolis, a hub of commerce, culture, and history, and thankfully, reaching it is usually straightforward, regardless of whether you're coming from another corner of India or crossing continents. The city is well-served by air, rail, and road networks, offering a variety of options to suit different budgets, time constraints, and travel preferences. Choosing how you arrive can be the first step in tailoring your Kolkata experience, whether you prefer the swift descent from the clouds, the rhythmic clatter of a train journey, or the unfolding landscape seen from a road trip.

Arrival by air is often the quickest way to reach Kolkata, especially for international visitors or those travelling from distant parts of India. The city is served by the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport, bearing the IATA code CCU. It's located in Dum Dum, roughly 17 kilometers northeast of the city center. This distance might sound modest, but Kolkata's legendary traffic can turn this into a significant drive, so factor that into your planning. Remember the name - Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport - it's a mouthful, but knowing it helps when booking flights or directing transport. Locally, it's still very commonly referred to simply as "Dum Dum Airport."

The airport itself is a modern facility, having undergone significant upgrades. It boasts an integrated terminal building (often referred to as Terminal 2) that handles both domestic and international flights under one expansive, sleek roof. This integration simplifies transfers for passengers connecting between international and domestic routes. Gone are the days of distinctly separate, older terminals; the current setup is far more streamlined and user-friendly, designed to handle the increasing volume of air traffic the city attracts. The architecture is contemporary, a stark contrast to the colonial-era buildings you'll encounter later in the city itself.

International travellers flying into Kolkata will find direct connections primarily from Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern hubs. Cities like Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Dhaka are well-connected, served by airlines such as Emirates, Qatar Airways, Etihad, Thai Airways, Singapore Airlines, IndiGo, Air India, and Biman Bangladesh Airlines. If you're coming from Europe, North America, or Australia, you'll typically need to connect through one of these hubs or perhaps via major Indian cities like Delhi or Mumbai. Check your airline options carefully, as routes and carriers can change.

Domestically, CCU is extremely well-connected to virtually every major city in India.

Airlines like IndiGo, Air India, SpiceJet, Vistara, and Akasa Air operate frequent flights to and from Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Pune, Guwahati, Bagdogra (for Darjeeling and Sikkim), Port Blair (Andaman Islands), and many other destinations. The sheer volume of domestic flights makes air travel a popular choice for navigating India's vast distances efficiently. Booking domestic flights well in advance is usually advisable, especially during peak seasons or festival times, to secure better fares.

Upon landing at CCU, the arrival process follows standard international procedures. You'll first proceed to immigration control. Ensure your visa requirements are in order before you even board your flight to India. Immigration queues can sometimes be long, particularly if several flights land simultaneously, so patience is a virtue. Have your passport, visa (if applicable), and landing card (usually distributed on the flight) ready. Following immigration, you'll head down to the baggage reclaim area to collect your checked luggage. Display screens indicate the carousel assigned to your flight.

Once you have your bags, you'll pass through customs. India has regulations regarding dutiable goods, currency declaration (for large amounts), and restricted items. Most tourists carrying standard personal belongings will pass through the green channel without issue. However, if you are carrying goods that might require declaration or duty payment, use the red channel and speak to a customs officer. It's always wise to be aware of the current customs allowances and restrictions before you travel. Ignorance of the rules is rarely accepted as an excuse.

After clearing customs, you emerge into the arrivals hall. This area offers several essential services for arriving passengers. You'll find currency exchange counters (operated by banks and authorized money changers) and ATMs. It's generally recommended to exchange only a small amount of currency at the airport, enough for immediate expenses like transport, as rates might be slightly less favorable than in the city. ATMs are often a convenient way to withdraw Indian Rupees directly, but check with your bank about international transaction fees beforehand.

The arrivals hall also has information desks, pre-paid taxi counters, app-based cab booking zones (for services like Uber and Ola), and counters for arranging transport to hotels. For those unfamiliar with the city, the pre-paid taxi service is a reliable, if slightly more expensive, option. You pay a fixed fare based on your destination zone at the counter and receive a receipt to give to the designated driver. This system avoids the need for haggling. App-based cabs are also very popular and often competitively priced, but require a working Indian SIM card or airport Wi-Fi access to book.

While the airport is modern and functional, finding your onward transport can sometimes feel a bit chaotic, especially during peak hours. Don't be flustered by the touts who might approach you offering taxi services; stick to the official pre-paid

counters or designated app-cab pick-up points for a smoother experience. There are also airport bus services connecting to various points in the city, offering a much more economical option, although potentially slower and less convenient if you have lots of luggage. The airport is also connected, albeit indirectly currently, to the city's Metro network, requiring a short auto-rickshaw ride to the nearest station (Noapara), though a direct link is under construction. We'll delve deeper into navigating the city's transport in the next chapter.

For many travellers, particularly those exploring India extensively, arriving by train is an experience in itself, and Kolkata is arguably the grand dame of Indian railway destinations. The city is served by several major railway stations, each a bustling microcosm of Indian life, handling millions of passengers daily. The sheer scale and energy of Kolkata's railway stations can be overwhelming for first-time visitors, but they are the gateways through which much of the nation flows into the city. Understanding which station you might arrive at is key.

The undisputed monarch among Kolkata's stations is Howrah Junction (station code: HWH). Located not technically *in* Kolkata but across the Hooghly River in the twin city of Howrah, it's connected to Kolkata by the iconic Howrah Bridge (Rabindra Setu) and the newer Vidyasagar Setu. Howrah Station is one of the oldest, largest, and busiest railway complexes in India. Its imposing red-brick Victorian structure is a landmark in itself. It primarily serves trains connecting Kolkata with western, southern, central, and northern India. Major long-distance trains like the Rajdhani Express (to Delhi, Bhubaneswar), Duronto Express, and numerous mail and express trains terminate or originate here.

Arriving at Howrah can be an intense sensory experience – the cacophony of announcements, the sea of people, the aroma of chai and station snacks, the organised chaos of licensed porters (coolies) in their red uniforms navigating impossibly large loads. The station is vast, with over twenty platforms spread across the old and new complexes. Finding your way requires paying attention to signage and platform announcements. Facilities include waiting rooms (AC and non-AC), retiring rooms (basic accommodation), food courts, book stalls, and pre-paid taxi and bus stands outside. Crossing the Howrah Bridge into Kolkata proper, whether by taxi, bus, or ferry, offers a dramatic first glimpse of the city.

On the Kolkata side of the river lies Sealdah Station (station code: SDAH). While Howrah might have the grander architecture, Sealdah is arguably just as busy, if not busier, especially considering its role as a colossal hub for suburban trains serving the surrounding districts, in addition to long-distance services. Sealdah primarily handles trains connecting Kolkata with northern West Bengal (including routes towards Darjeeling via New Jalpaiguri), Bangladesh (Maitree Express and Bandhan Express), and parts of eastern and northern India. If you're travelling from cities like Siliguri, Darjeeling, or even parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, you might arrive here.

Sealdah is divided into three sections: Sealdah Main, Sealdah North, and Sealdah South, serving different routes. Like Howrah, it's a whirlwind of activity. The station complex is perhaps slightly less architecturally grand than Howrah but equally functional, with numerous platforms and essential passenger amenities. Getting transport from Sealdah is similar to Howrah, with pre-paid taxis, yellow ambassador cabs, app-based cabs, buses, and auto-rickshaws readily available outside. It's located more centrally within North Kolkata compared to Howrah.

To ease congestion at the two main giants, Kolkata Station (station code: KOAA) was established more recently in the northern part of the city. This modern terminal, also known as Chitpur Station, serves several important long-distance trains, particularly towards North India (like Delhi, Amritsar, Rajasthan) and some trains heading towards Bangladesh. It was specifically designed to take some pressure off Sealdah. While lacking the historical weight of Howrah or the sheer commuter volume of Sealdah, Kolkata Station is a comparatively calmer and cleaner arrival point, though still busy by most standards. Transport links are developing but readily available.

Further south, primarily serving the South Eastern Railway network, are Shalimar Station (SHM) and Santragachi Junction (SRC). Shalimar, located near the Botanical Garden in Shibpur (Howrah district), handles several express trains heading towards the south and west, acting as an alternative terminal to Howrah for certain routes. Santragachi, also in Howrah district, is another major junction, particularly for trains bypassing the main Howrah terminal, serving routes towards Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and western India. Arriving at these stations might be slightly less common for general tourists unless their specific train terminates there, but they are important parts of the city's extensive rail network.

Booking train tickets for Indian Railways is best done online via the official Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) website or its mobile app. This requires registration, and payment can be made using Indian or international cards (though international card success can sometimes be inconsistent). Alternatively, tickets can be booked at computerized reservation counters found at major railway stations across India or through authorized travel agents. Booking well in advance (sometimes months ahead for popular trains or peak seasons) is highly recommended, as trains often get fully booked quickly. Indian Railways offers various classes of travel, from air-conditioned first class (1AC) down to unreserved second class, catering to all budgets.

Regardless of which station you arrive at, be prepared for crowds and activity. Keep your belongings secure, be wary of unsolicited offers of help, and utilize official services like licensed porters (agree on the fee beforehand, though official rates exist) and pre-paid transport counters. Arriving by train offers a unique slice of Indian life and can be a rewarding, albeit sometimes challenging, start to your Kolkata journey.

The rumble of the train giving way to the vibrant chaos of a Kolkata station is an arrival experience many travellers cherish.

Reaching Kolkata by road is another viable option, particularly if you're travelling from neighbouring states or cities. The city is connected by a network of National Highways (NH). Key routes include NH19 (part of the Golden Quadrilateral, connecting Delhi-Kolkata), NH16 (connecting Chennai-Kolkata, also part of the Golden Quadrilateral), and NH12 (connecting North Bengal/Bihar border to Kolkata). These highways facilitate travel by private car, taxi, or long-distance bus. Road conditions on the main National Highways are generally good, though state highways and approach roads near the city can vary.

Long-distance bus services connect Kolkata with numerous cities across West Bengal and neighbouring states like Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, and even states further afield. Both state-run transport corporations (like the West Bengal Transport Corporation - WBTC) and numerous private operators run services. Buses range from basic non-air-conditioned coaches to comfortable air-conditioned Volvo or Scania multi-axle sleepers. These services are often very economical, making them a popular choice for budget travellers or for routes not well-served by trains.

The main hub for long-distance buses arriving in Kolkata is the Esplanade Bus Terminus, located right in the heart of the city near Dharmatala/Chowringhee. This area is perpetually busy, a central point for city transport as well. Arriving here places you immediately amidst the bustle of central Kolkata. Buses from different operators might arrive at slightly different points within the general Esplanade vicinity. Booking bus tickets can usually be done online through various travel portals (like RedBus, MakeMyTrip) or directly at the bus operator's counters or agents in the departure city.

Driving your own vehicle or hiring a private taxi to Kolkata is certainly possible. If driving, ensure you have all necessary vehicle documents (registration, insurance, pollution certificate) and are familiar with Indian driving conditions, which can be challenging due to traffic density, varied road discipline, and unexpected obstacles like livestock or pedestrians on highways. Using GPS navigation is highly recommended. Hiring an inter-city taxi can be a comfortable option, especially for groups, allowing stops along the way. Fares should be negotiated and agreed upon beforehand or booked through reputable services.

Entering Kolkata by road, especially during peak hours, often involves navigating significant traffic congestion. The city's arterial roads can get extremely crowded. Patience is essential as you approach the city limits and make your way towards your accommodation. While the highways leading to the city might offer smooth sailing for stretches, the final leg of the journey can be slow. However, arriving by road allows you to witness the transition from rural or semi-urban landscapes to the dense urban fabric of Kolkata gradually unfolding before you.

Choosing the best way to get to Kolkata depends heavily on your starting point, budget, and how much time you have. Flying is undoubtedly the fastest, especially from distant locations, but usually the most expensive. Trains offer a classic Indian travel experience, connect a vast network of places affordably, and allow you to see the landscape change, but journeys can be long. Buses provide an economical alternative, particularly for regional travel, while driving offers flexibility but demands navigating Indian road conditions and city traffic. Whichever method you choose, your arrival marks the beginning of your exploration of this fascinating city. Prepare for the energy, the history, and the unique character that define Kolkata, starting from the moment you step off your plane, train, or bus.

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