

ROADIES

We've rounded up some of the best road journeys in India that are most suited to folks on spokes—be it cars, bikes or bicycles. Choose your style and witness the staggering beauty of India this summer.

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Travelling in India offers a diverse journey and eclectic experiences, depending on the wheels you choose

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First-timer drivers to the Northeast can drive from Jorhat to Kohima, while wending through the jungle routes of Kaziranga National Park

If you find yourself drawn to inspiring landscapes of virgin forests, valleys and the treasure of cultural wealth, then India is a draw that is hard to resist. After all, both its undisturbed or throbbing destinations showcase the flourish of nature, bustling towns and cities, and the people who live in them. Travelling in India offers a journey within, just as much as without. When it comes to choosing the wheels with which to traverse the country, self-drivers fall in different slots. Bikers have the 'Kamikazian' zeal to take adventure head-on. Others might prefer the safe and comfortable cocoon of a car. Then there are cyclists who like to pace themselves to the rhythm of local life, going by the mantra of 'slow travel.' Either way, the essence of their travel hinges on a common note—the journey is more immersive than the destination itself.

Rough Roads

When a travel route comes with a warning, chances are it rewards one with incredible adventures. In this section we cover three gorgeous circuits that will appeal to adventure-seekers.

Jorhat–Kohima

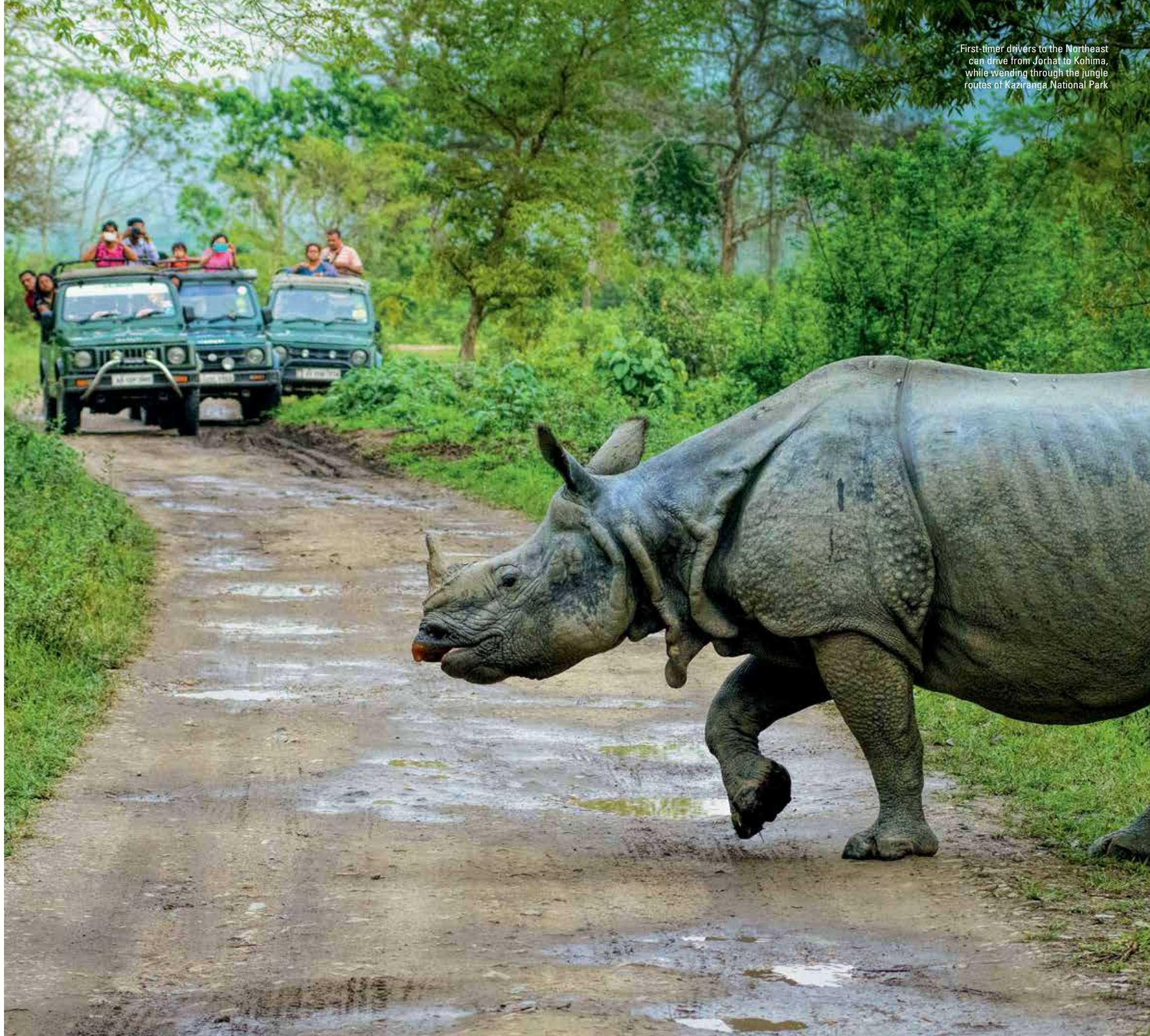
An exploration of the northeastern states could take months if you were to cover all Seven Sisters. First-timer drivers to the region are better off starting from Jorhat, wending through the wild tracts of Kaziranga National Park and then heading to Kohima via Mopongchuket. This eastern edge of the country offers a glimpse of unique natural terrain and culturally rich tribal life. The untouched natural beauty of countless hills and valleys, and tribal villages with distinct heritage, make for an intriguing adventure for the offbeat traveller. Proud and hospitable tribals inhabit hilltop villages. Share your evenings with locals in family kitchens, where a central fire is constantly flickering. See some of the cleanest parts of the country, where eco consciousness is beyond jargon.

Distance 458 km

Time 2-3 days

Route Jorhat → Kaziranga → Mopongchuket → Kohima

Recommended Accommodation Nature Hunt Eco Camp (Kaziranga) and Cimorb Hotel (Kohima)



Manali-Leh

The cold desert trawl that covers Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir has been the rite of passage for bikers for a long time. The interior highlands offer a dramatic setting, with craggy mountains and plateaux, broken by the seemingly never-ending company of rivers in deep gorges below. The three-day trip tests the rider on all parameters—skills to drive on virtually no roads, capacity to take on increasing altitude and decreasing temperature, and the concentration of riding in the mountains. The never-seen-before grandeur of the towering mountains and the beauty in nothingness for miles promises to stimulate all senses.

Distance 490 km

Time 2-3 days

Route Manali → Rohtang Pass → Keylong → Jispa → Baralacha La → Sarchu → Gata Loops → Tanglang La → Leh

Recommended

Accommodation Dorje Lhakpa Homestay (Jispa), Oriental Guest House (Leh)



(Facing page) The three-day ride from Manali to Leh offers a stunning setting; expect to see serene monasteries in a face-off with dramatic mountains on a bicycle trip through Spiti



Spiti

If there is one destination that truly exemplifies the phrase ‘soul stirring,’ it is Spiti. Many cyclists choose to ditch the Leh sector and be inspired by the cold desert region of Spiti, in the upper reaches of Himachal Pradesh. The terrain is challenging, yet exciting, making cyclists push the pedal meditatively to reach some of the highest places in the country—and even the world. Expect to see serene monasteries on hilltops in a face-off with dramatic mountains.

Here maroon-robed monks live life simply, making one re-think the vagaries of city living. Thanks to the rough terrain and basic life of the mountains, a trip to Spiti covers many feelings on the spectrum—from adrenalin pumping moments to calming mindfulness.

Distance 564 km

Time 7-10 days

Route Chandigarh → Shimla → Narkanda → Sangla → Pooh → Nako → Tabo → Kaza

Recommended

Accommodation HPTC Guesthouse (Shimla), Haatu Peak Homestay (Narkanda), Banjara Camps (Sangla), Lake View Hotel (Nako), Hotel Sakya Abode (Kaza)

A drive to Amritsar, which houses the Golden Temple, promises sweeping views of mustard fields; the rolling hills of the Nilgiris are ideal for a weekend bike ride getaway; the straight east coast road to Puducherry is a cyclist's dream



Essential Trips

Holidaying on wheels may not be everyone's cup of tea, but all a person may need is someone to ignite the idea of self-travel. Here are some of the easiest routes that can kick off a travelling habit for a lifetime.

Delhi–Amritsar

Home to one of the holiest Sikh shrines in the world, the Golden Temple, Punjab is ranked on top of the list for spiritual travellers. But there is so much more to the state than spirituality alone. While the capital, Chandigarh, garners interest as one of the most aesthetically planned cities, Amritsar stands firm as the historical heart of the state. A drive from Delhi promises sweeping views of tracts of green and yellow blooming mustard fields, crisscrossing canals, vibrant culture, the legacy of the Sikh gurus and the high-spiritedness of locals. No wonder Amritsar makes for a great road trip. The city also has an appeal that suits most travel tastes—literally and figuratively. The slim lanes near the Golden Temple are crammed with local snacks shops.

Distance 457 km

Time 8 hours

Route Delhi → Panipat → Ludhiana → Amritsar

Recommended Accommodation Ramada Amritsar

The Nilgiris Loop

Leaving Bengaluru's choked roads for the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu is the best way to get rid of city blues. En route you're flanked by a million shades of green and every bend reveals exponentially better views than the last one. The good thing is that you get to test the mettle of your machine on the highway, especially when you peter down to slower tracts around villages and then pile on pace again. This is no high-octane adventure but ideal for a weekend getaway to rejuvenate. The Nilgiris, the Blue Mountains of the south, also boast rolling hills of tea plantations and the legacy of the Raj.

Distance 319 km

Time 9 hours

Route Bengaluru → Bandipur → Ooty → Coonoor → Kotagiri

Recommended Accommodation Sunshine Bungalow, Kotagiri

Chennai–Puducherry

The east coast highway from Chennai to Puducherry is one of the best riding routes that the country has to offer. No real street creds are needed for this route, as there is one straight road—no ups and downs. With the Bay of Bengal keeping company on the left, the only thing that may be challenging to navigate is the sea breeze. But the rewards of stopping on near-empty strips of golden beaches far outweigh the fact that there are no hills to negotiate. The route in kilometres may be short, but the hours can be long, if you decide to stop at the weaving hub, Kanchipuram, and the stone temples of Mahabalipuram.

Distance 221 km

Time 2 days

Route Chennai → Kanchipuram → Mahabalipuram → Puducherry

Recommended Accommodation Hotel Mamalla Heritage (Mahabalipuram), Le Closerie (Puducherry)

Planning For A Road Trip

Though every trip will have unique challenges, here's a generic guide to prepare for road trips.

1. Essentials Ensure that your tool kit, documents, hazard indicator, spare tyre, coolant and oils are in place before you head out on a long drive. Most cars, bikes and cycles supply a suggested tyre pressure limit for highways, which is different

from that for daily use. Get your tyres checked for air a day before leaving. Mechanic help may not be available for long stretches, so invest in a ready-to-use puncture liquid for emergencies.

2. Different terrain

Negotiating varying terrain can be exhausting and requires a lot of concentration. Use lower gears to manoeuvre on winding roads and

always be alert for any burning smell—it could be the brakes or the clutch for a car and bike. Always stay on your side of the road. Sleep well the night before. Try and head out early in the morning for better visibility.

3. Wildlife tracts Several of these routes straddle forest cover and national parks. Though many of these highways are closed at

night, evenings are a sensitive time for visibility. Be extra alert and wary of deer, wild boar, sambar and snakes on the roads.

4. Safety gear for riders Durable gear is the most important part of riding. Jackets with night visibility strips, helmets, and knee and elbow pads are a must when riding. A balaclava is also recommended to keep the dust out.

Over A Long Weekend

Not everyone can strip themselves away from routine and enjoy a break for weeks. For them, the quickest way to resuscitate life into a mundane schedule is by taking off on a weekend. If you can club days to squeeze more time in, even better.

Coastal Maharashtra

The fast-paced sprawling metropolis of Mumbai and other busy hubs like

Pune are blessed with options to pull the brakes on city life. Maharashtra is teeming with great weekend getaway options that feature languid beaches, wildlife sanctuaries and forts perched on hilltops. In short, there is something for everyone. But it's the appeal of the rustic, beach-lined Konkan coast that makes for a great drive from Mumbai. En route, one can explore laidback fishing villages that spring into action

only in the mornings. Kilometres of uninhabited coastline, ancient temples and varied terrain make the drive more exciting.

Distance 545 km

Time 2 days

Route Pune → Harihareshwar → Ganpatipule → Tarkarli

Recommended Accommodation MTDC Beach Resort (Ganpatipule), Kinara Resort (Tarkarli)



(Facing page) One can explore hilltop forts and laidback fishing villages on a drive through coastal Maharashtra; the breezy coastline between Udupi and Goa is ideal to cruise along on your cycle



Udupi–Goa

The less-driven Konkan stretch from Udupi to Goa is ideal to cruise with the Arabian Sea for company. Detour at fishing villages, virtually undisturbed beaches and ancient temples. This will also offer a perfect antidote to the tarmac and land you on muddy trails for a short while. Hop back in the saddle to make your way through major coastal towns that dish out great seafood. Surfing schools and odd museums have

also come up on this breezy coastline—you'll have to choose between sticking to schedule and experience.

Distance 304 km

Time 4 days

Route Udupi → Mulki → Murudeshwar → Karwar → Goa

Recommended Accommodation Ashram Surf Retreat (Mulki), Hotel RNS Residency (Murudeshwar), Devbagh Beach Resort (Karwar), Chattai Beach Huts (Goa)

 **Guwahati–
Cherrapunji–
Shnongpdeng**

Unabashed and pristine, nature puts up a great show on this route. Only 100 km from the plains of Guwahati, the terrain changes to the pine-clad hills of Shillong. The road swings ahead to Cherrapunji, where low-roofed homes in sparsely-populated hamlets sprinkle a dash of colour on the otherwise decidedly green canvas. The clouds spill out of valleys, as if on cue, to make every traveller speechless. The roads are whimsical in patches, but the ride is mostly comfortable. Since one never loses sight of habitation, there is always a great pit-stop close by. Across the border from Cherrapunji lie the sultry brown plains of Bangladesh. The senses are immediately cooled when one gazes at the mirror flat and see-through waters of Dawki and Shnongpdeng.

Distance 245 km

Time 2 days

Route Guwahati → Shillong → Cherrapunji → Shnongpdeng

Recommended

Accommodation Polo Orchid Hotel (Cherrapunji), Pioneer Adventure Camp (Shnongpdeng)



The see-through waters of Dawki and Shnongpdeng cool the senses after a bike ride from Guwahati via Shillong