

# CHHATTISGARH CALLING!

If you haven't heard of what Chhattisgarh offers the discerning traveller...here is a comprehensive list. If you haven't ventured deep into the heart of India...now is the time.

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Rushing water plummeting down onto a bed of rocks—the Chitrakote waterfalls are postcard-perfect



**S**liced off from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh is one of the newest states of India, but one of the oldest enclaves, thriving with ancient traditions and customs. Weekly *haats* (markets), ancient temples, dense and deep jungles, frothing waterfalls, a well-defined spiritual circuit and intriguing customs are some of the things that awaken travellers to a new world. We've curated a list of some of the things that may feature as essentials for a complete Chhattisgarh immersion, but with a destination as characterful as this, we'd never get ahead of ourselves to commit that it is fully comprehensible in one trip.

### **Wild At Heart**

Expect an endless carpet of green no matter where you look. Cloaked in paddy fields, thick undergrowth and dark forests, Chhattisgarh's landscape is further embellished by shimmering rivers and sheets of water breaking the calm drift to fall gloriously on a bed of rocks. In short, nature has used its most mesmerising charm in Chhattisgarh. The state's elegance unfolds in every new location. Despite massive deforestation of saal trees at the hands of European settlers, Chhattisgarh's forest cover can still leave you speechless. Amongst the top national parks and sanctuaries, the canopy of towering trees and continuous woodlands of **Kanger Valley National Park**, **Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary** and **Achanakmar** come to mind before the others. Though the forests are teeming with wild inhabitants, they do not get prominence like some of the popular destinations in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh—much to the offbeat traveller's delight. Expect to see large mammals like wild buffaloes, tigers, wild boars and families of nimble deer in the tall grasslands and thick woods. **Kanger Valley National Park** in Bastar is especially popular for caves filled with ancient stalactite and stalagmite formations.

### **Stunning Waterfalls**

Apart from surrendering to the silence of deep forests, you can also absorb the aura of rushing water flung over rocky escarpments in **Chitrakote**, **Mandawa** and **Tamara Ghoomar**, amongst other waterfalls. Of these, the U-shaped Chitrakote is postcard-perfect. Watching the monsoon-swollen **Indravati river** plummet 95 feet before crashing on a rocky bed is one of the most stunning sights in the state. A small path winds down to the base of the falls at a distance, so you can face the white curtain of water that falls with great flourish and pomp. Seasoned fishermen take slim dinghies right up to the edge of the water, making the scene even more dramatic. The other way to see the falls from a comfortable spot are the government-run luxury tent camps that are propped diagonally opposite the falls. It is recommended to stay a night here, in the company of a constant symphony of rushing water.

### Monuments Of Wonder

Chhattisgarh has a remarkable collection of temples and monuments that have an abiding spiritual essence. While temples and Buddhist *viharas* built during the third and 11th centuries dot parts of north Chhattisgarh, it's the abode of **Danteshwari Devi** in **Dantewada** and the ruins of **Barsur** that hold sway in the south. Dramatic ruins in **Sirpur** are easily accessible from the capital, Raipur, and can be traversed over a day. The epicentre in the northwest is **Kawardha**, where the ancient **Bhoramdeo Temple**, with a 'Kamasutra-esque' canvas and relics around, is located. **Rajim** hosts the grand **Kumbh Mela** for sages at the confluence of the Mahanadi, Pairi and Sondur rivers. There are dozens of spiritual interest locations in the state, which could account for a trip alone.

### Eminent Sirpur

The now sleepy town of Sirpur is barely a testimony for the once culturally vibrant capital of ancient Dakshin Koshala. It was one of the busiest trading ports and architecturally rich places in the country, considered even more eminent than Harappa of the Indus Valley Civilisation. Today, you can stroll around ruins of the sixth to 10th centuries established temples and monasteries like the **Lakshman Mandir**, **Teevardev Complex**, **Ram Temple**, **Anand Prabhu Kuti Vihar**, **Gandeshwar Temple** and **Surang Tila**. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has visited Sirpur, not once but twice, citing his draw as the immense peace that he has felt here. Sirpur is only an hour and a half-hour drive from Raipur.

### Ghatrani Waterfall & Jatmai Temple

The Ghatrani Waterfall and Jatmai Temple lie within eight km of each other and about 90 km southeast of Raipur. The **Ghatrani Waterfall** announces itself before you can see it through the thick foliage of saal trees. You can go to the base across a bridge, walking past a Bhairava statue. In the leafy embrace of a thick-forested area lies the **Jatmai Temple**.

### The Tri Loop Of Champaran, Rajim And Arang

Champaran holds special significance for the Vallabh sect, as this was the place where founder **Saint Vallabhacharya** was born. A big complex of bright shrines and exhibits draws devotees from all parts of the country. At the confluence of the Mahanadi, Pairi and Sondur lies the spiritual town of **Rajim**—the 'Prayag' of Chhattisgarh. The **Rajiv Lochan Temple** is the biggest highlight of the town, apart from the periodic **Kumbh Mela** that is organised on a grand scale. Remains of the ninth-century **Bhand Deval Temple** will interest history

enthusiasts. Now in ruins, the architecture is distinct with a *mandapa*, *garbgriha* and a spire. Inside the sanctum, idols of three Tirthankaras are enshrined.

### The Temple Of Sheorinarayan

Sheorinarayan (Shivinarayan) is located at the confluence of three rivers—Mahanadi, Jonk and Shivrath, near the city of **Bilaspur**. Apart from being a coveted 'holy dip' town, it is well known for its **Nar Narayan Temple** that was built by King Shabar. Shabari, a notable character in the *Ramayana*, finds significance in this temple. It is said that the temple also commemorates her and her unwavering devotion to Lord Ram.

### Kawardha Temple Complex

A masterpiece of architecture, the **Bhoramdeo Temple** lies 17 km from **Kawardha**. Wend your way through an idyllic setting of the simple village life of the Baigas and the dense woods. Ornate patterns and sculptures cover every inch of the walls of the temple. The sanctum lies a couple of steps below the *mandapa*, with a *shivaling* in the middle. Four rows of sculptures cover the length of the temple—from the base to the spire. Other less exquisite but ancient temples like **Mandwa Mahal** and **Cherki Mahal** lie in a 10-km radius.

### The Hill Town Of Mainpat

A Tibetan settlement (formally known as the Phende Ling Tibetan Settlement), Mainpat is fragmented into seven camps on this plateau and is Chhattisgarh's designated 'hill station'. Great weather apart, it is known for the monasteries and red-robed monks who pray in them. Fluttering prayer flags and the sounds of chants from the monasteries waft through the crisp air of the town.

### Destination Dantewada

It is said that the name **Danteshwari Devi** was given to the original Manikeshwari Devi of the Nagavanshi kings who ruled the region before the Kakatiyas of Warangal arrived in **Dantewada**, south of the state in Bastar. Though the ancestral deity came with the Kakatiya king, Rudra Pratap Dev, who decided to enshrine her at the confluence of two rivers, both Hindus and tribals of Bastar accepted her as the Kuldevi. Each year, **Bastar Dussehra** is celebrated to commemorate her as the most important goddess of the region. While Dussehra is an apt time to visit the Danteshwari Temple in **Dantewada**, the spiritual fervour runs strong even on other days.



(Above) A complex of shrines and exhibits, Champaran, the birthplace of Saint Vallabhacharya, is special for the Vallabh sect; His Holiness the Dalai Lama has visited Sirpur twice

Chhattisgarh is home to seven major tribes—Bison Horn is one of them; (facing page) a Gond dancer prepares to mount his bamboo sticks and thump to tribal percussion



The tribals of Chhattisgarh are known for their craftsmanship using various natural resources; (below) the *haats* are a weekly coming together of tribal communities selling their ware



### River-side Barsur

The only remnant of the erstwhile stronghold of the Chhinndak Nagwanshi rulers as early as 840 AD, **Barsur** is home to many chronicles in stone. The town lies at the edge of the Indravati river and is known as the city of temples and ponds. It is said that the town has 147 temples and an equal number of ponds. Of these, only a few are prominent and worth a visit—**Pedamma Temple, Mama-Bhanja, Twin Ganesha, Solah Khamba, Battisa Shiva Temple** and **Chandraditya Temple**.

### Meet The Tribals Of Bastar

The entire belly of India, including parts of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and even Andhra Pradesh can be called the 'tribal belt of Gonds'. In the context of Chhattisgarh, while many of the tribes speak the universal Gondi language (also their own tribal dialects), their identities can be distinguished by physical features, clothing, music, dance and crafts. The main tribal ring in south central Chhattisgarh (Bastar) is occupied by seven major tribes—Bison Horn Marias, Abhuj (or Hill Marias) Murias, Bhatras, Dhurvas, Halbas, Dorlas and Gadbas. These are further divided into sub-sects that make for almost 40 tribes. The northwestern parts of the state are home to the Baigas, easily identifiable by the tattooed faces of the women. The only way to get a peek into the local life in the villages is to visit during *madhai* (a fair or festival), when the mood is charged and hospitality is at its best. Else, visit a local weekly market.

### Haats Of Chhattisgarh

For a crash course in seeing local life, cuisines, crafts and identifying tribals from different regions, there is no better place to visit than the weekly markets or *haats*. Each day of the week is assigned to one or more regions, for the weekly *haat*. Small shops come up with vegetables (sold in units of 20, known as *cowrie*), toiletries, fish, clothes, local liquor and other things that one might need during the course of the week. Communities trudge up to 1,000 km on foot or tempos to arrive at their regional *haat* by noon, so the best time to visit is around lunch, when commerce and activity are in full swing. Traditionally, the *haat* was not only a place where tribals could barter local produce but also a communal hotspot to socialise, drink and exchange news. Male-dominated rinks hosting cockfights are a prominent feature during the *haats* and cater to the weekly dose of low-stake gambling.

### Arts & Handicrafts

The innate creative talent of the tribals produces wonders in metal, wood, clay and other natural materials. Most of the themes are hinged on local gods and goddesses and the agro background of the state. Small clusters of homes are often engaged in crafts like bell metal work (*dhokra*), wrought iron craft, terracotta, cowrie shell work, sisal and bamboo products, weaving, stone carving, wood craft, Kosa silk production, Tumba art, Godna printing and tribal painting. One can visit Saathi, an NGO based in Kondagaon, which helps access villages around. Since the crafts are widespread and addressed in small clutches, one needs ample time to detour from the highways and see entire households engrossed in keeping the crafts alive.

### Attend A Jagaar

Lakshmi Jagaar is an oral tradition of performing a ritually enacted myth, featuring Goddess Lakshmi and her consort, Narayan. Largely seen in the Halbi-speaking areas of Bastar, one has to visit villages of **Jagdarpur, Narayanpur, Kondagaon, Dantewada** and **Bijapur** to attend one. The local temple of the village hosts the **Lakshmi Jagaar** for three consecutive years and is hero-worshipped by elder women called *gurmeyeys* (singers). The ceremony is rooted in themes of harvest, love and protection. These are usually held in the winter months of October-February. The Lakshmi Jagaar can start on any day, but must end on a Thursday. On this day, the songs are sung for the whole night. In fact, Jagaar can be translated to 'being awake'. Apart from being a devoted religious gesture, it also has entertainment value, as villagers gather together to meet at the local temple. While Lakshmi and Narayan are the highlights of the story, it is organised to invoke gods from all parts of Chhattisgarh (and other places) to bless the village for a better harvest and a prosperous year. The folk tale sung by the *gurmeyeys* is the highlight of any Lakshmi Jagaar.

### Bastar Dussehra

Use **Jagdarpur** as the base to see the festivities of the 75-day unique Dussehra celebrations from July to October, when both the Hindus and tribal population of the region commemorate Goddess Danteshwari. Fascinating rituals and ceremonies unfold as the region throws itself into celebrations. Plan a trip around the last 10 days when Jagdarpur transforms into a melting pot of cultural activity with thousands of tribals descending onto the city to take part in the ancient rituals. The highlight of the festival is a large indigenous wooden *rath*



The 75-day Bastar Dussehra celebrations are a unique



coming together of the Hindus and tribal population to commemorate Goddess Danteshwari; white and frothy, *salphi* is Chhattisgarh's home-grown liquor

(chariot) that is made by locals of Bedamar and Jharumar villages and pulled by the Bison Horn Marias. Legend goes that one such *rath* was brought from neighbouring Odisha, and the ceremony was imported from Puri, where the Kakatiya kings did the same at the Jagannath Temple. The chariot moves along with the beat of the Munda Bajans, played by a small troupe from a specific community from the nearby Potanar village. The town is alive with markets, ceremonies at different temples and visits to the **Bastar Palace**. People carrying Anga *devas* (local gods propped on heavy ladders) are often seen breaking into trance-induced runs, adding a mystical mood to the entire scene.

### Unique Brews Of Chhattisgarh

Alcohol is un-sensational and an essential part of the daily life of the tribals. The local potent brews possibly give them the bravado to live in extremely elemental circumstances. Do not be surprised to see women and children (in small proportions) also drinking regularly. The shady mahua tree that dots the entire belly of India is the main source of ingredients for

the namesake drink. They yield summer flowers that are processed to make the potent local colourless alcoholic drink. Dried mahua flowers can be seen in piles in the local *haats*. The white, frothy *salphi* might be more palatable for the urban palate. It is a beer-like drink that is best consumed straight from a container made of *tumba* (gourd).

*Salphi* has both a practical and heart-warming legend attached to it. The tribals used to plant a *salphi* tree (fish tail sago palm) as soon as a child was born in the house. Both the child and the tree would grow together, under similar care, and at the age of 18, the tree could start yielding the sap, which is used for several purposes in tribal life. The young person could sell this to earn a living and use the product of the tree for his family. The tapping schedule is adhered to with great precision—once every morning and evening at fixed times, thrice in summer. Many tribals believe that *salphi* cures diabetes and serves as an antiseptic as well—but for most, it's the beverage to pick on a warm afternoon in the plains. *Chhind* is another version of *salphi*, also extracted from a type of palm. Other versions of this are *landa* (made from fermented

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rice) and *rusum* (made from jaggery). The best place to try these is a *haat*, where rows of women scoop drinks from large cauldrons and serve them in a leaf cup. ♦

### NAVIGATOR

#### GETTING THERE

Raipur, the capital city of Chhattisgarh, is connected by air, rail and road to major metros and cities of India. The state's airport is situated about 15 km from the town. Air India, Jet Airways, Jet Konnect and Indigo are some of the airlines that service Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Indore, Nagpur, Kolkata, Chennai and other major cities from here. The Raipur railway station lies on the Howrah-Nagpur-Mumbai line, with connectivity to key cities in North, East and Central parts of the country.

#### BEST TIME TO GO TO CHHATTISGARH

As in most of Central India, the most viable period to travel is from October to March. Culture aficionados should keep *madhais* (fairs and festivals) in mind; most of them happen between January and March. The Jagdalpur Tribal Dussehra (Bastar Dussehra) starts as early as July and runs for 75 days, with the most exciting days in early to mid-October. The festivals are local calendar-driven, so planning with someone in Chhattisgarh is essential. The waterfalls circuit, the main draw for nature lovers, is best visited just after the monsoon.

#### ON GROUND ASSISTANCE

It is highly recommended to hire a guide for your trip, especially if you are interested in accessing the tribal villages. Seeing local life with experiences like a meal in the village,

visiting a temple ceremony or a visit to an artisan's house can only be done with the help of local knowledge.

#### STAY

It is likely that you're going to base yourself in Raipur to explore the belly of the state, Jagdalpur to get around Bastar and Kawardha to see the northern parts. Here are some of the recommended stays in Chhattisgarh.

#### Hyatt, Raipur

One of the few branded names to grace the city, the Hyatt experience is expectedly comfortable and luxurious.

[www.raipur.hyatt.com](http://www.raipur.hyatt.com)

#### Hotel Devansh Residency, Jagdalpur

A great pick from the otherwise weathered list of hotels in Jagdalpur, Devansh offers clean and spacious rooms. Room service, a high-end shower cubicle, internet, a fridge and flat-screen TV add up to give you the nudge to book.

Ph (0) 77822 21199

#### Palace Kawardha, Kawardha

Established in the 1930s by Maharaj Dharamraj Singh, the erstwhile palace and now hotel stands on 11 acres and is beautifully embellished with Italian marble, stone and art.

[www.palacekawardha.com](http://www.palacekawardha.com)

#### Chitrakote Luxury Tents, Chitrakote

Stay at least one night in either the cottages (12) or luxury tents (6) just ahead of the Chitrakote Waterfalls at the tourism board-run Chitrakote Luxury Tents. Choose the rightmost tents for a view of the falls or the more atmospheric tents that overlook the Indravati river snaking below in the valley.

[www.chhattisgarhtourism.net](http://www.chhattisgarhtourism.net)