

Farm fresh

Intern at an organic farm or spend a weekend plucking plump apples: Options to cultivate India's agri-tourism trend abound.

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The healing sight of green, the touch of moist soil in your hands or plucking vegetables straight off a plant instead of buying them shrouded in plastic; there are many joys of life on the farm. The smell of rain on dry earth evokes similar emotions, unlocking some primordial part of our brains that makes us feel connected to the earth. Oddly, humanity had no word for it until two Australian researchers coined one in 1964. Petrichor, derived from Greek *petra* (stone) and *ichor* (fluid coursing through veins of the gods), is akin to the earth's perfume, its pheromone. Equally surprising is the fact that in India, a country largely dependent on agriculture, farm stays and agri-tours took so long to sprout. Coffee, tea, grapes, mangoes, apple, spices and organic farms; choose from these wonderful themed holiday.

Coffee-estate stays (Coorg | Malnad)

Head to Baba Budan Giri where a Muslim mystic sowed seven coffee beans smuggled from Arabia from where it spread to the rest of the country. Visit the coffee museum at Chikmagalur and stay at Plantation Escapes' colonial bungalows at Ossoor Coffee Estate in Sakleshpur, a 1200-acre plantation started in 1866. Nearly 80% of India's coffee comes from neighbouring Kodagu or Coorg. To compensate fluctuating coffee prices, local planters spun their estate bungalows, fabled Kodava hospitality and delectable cuisine into unparalleled homestay experiences. Or do a Bean-to-Cup plantation walk at Tata Coffee's heritage bungalows in Coorg and Sakleshpur.

When to go: Coffee-picking season lasts till February.
Getting there: Jet Airways flies to Mangalore and Bengaluru from most cities in India. From here, enjoy the beautiful drive to these estates.

Tea plantation bungalows (Kangra | South India | North East India)

Know your oolong from your pekoe as you trace the journey of India's most popular brew from leaf to cup. From the dark fragrant Nilgiri tea to Munnar's full-bodied Kanan Devan tea, the bold maltiness of Assam or fine Darjeeling—the colour of Himalayan sunlight—India's tea-growing regions are diverse. Head to Kurseong, home to the world's first tea factory, where you can savour Silver Tips Imperial (the most expensive tea) while staying at homestays run by villagers. Grown in the Palampur hills by the British since 1882, the aromatic Kangra Tea produces a weak colour, but the Dhauladhar range's microclimate imparts a certain aroma after it is sun-dried.

When to go: Tea-picking season lasts from April to October.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies to Guwahati, Jorhat, Bagdogra and Coimbatore, from where you can reach these estates by road.

▲ Rajah Banerjee, owner of the Makaibari Tea Estates, introduces a tourist to tea picking.



Spice plantations & coconut farms (Kerala)

Kerala's legendary Spice Coast drew Arab traders and colonial powers to Indian shores for cardamom, cinnamon, clove and pepper, prized for centuries as Black Gold. The rich bounty of crops in coconut, rubber, areca and tapioca, coupled with a thriving tourism scene and wide choice of resorts, make Kerala perfect for a farm experience. Inspired by a mountain tribal dwelling, CGH Group's Spice Village at Thekkady is a good place for plantation walks. Instead of a staid reception desk, a herbal tea counter dispenses fresh tea brewed with the herb of your choice. Shalimar Spice Garden at Kumily offers Spice Plantation Tours with elephant rides through a plantation with bath, feeding and timber dragging rituals. Experience Syrian Christian hospitality at the Tharakans' Backwoods estate at Nilambur, home to the world's oldest teak plantation. Or find out how mussel farming is done on coir at Oyster Opera from Gul Mohammed, a recipient of the Karshaga Shiromani (National Award for agri-farming).

When to go: Kerala in the rains is ideal for a romantic escape or a rejuvenating Ayurveda treatment, though October to March is the main season.

Getting there: Jet Airways offers daily flights to Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode from various cities in India.

▲ Above: A cooking demonstration using home-grown spices, at CGH Group's Spice Village, Thekkady. Below: A walk through a spice plantation at Shalimar Spice Garden, Kumily.

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Grape-farming & Vineyard tours (Nashik)

Nashik, hailed as India's wine capital, brims with wineries and tasting rooms that offer an intimate experience through vineyard visits and cuisine tours. Understand the nuances of terroir, a combination of soil, climate, water and rainfall of a particular area that impart a unique character to wine. From the Sanjegaon valley caressed by the Godavari river to the twin hills of Nhera-Ori at Dindori, Nashik is easily the best place in India to become a wine enthusiast under the tutelage of ace sommeliers.

Getting there: Jet Airways offers daily flights to Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur.



Organic farmstays

(Sikkim | Arunachal Pradesh | Nagaland)

Sikkim's diverse farm stays provide insights into not just local farming practices but also the rich culture of various tribes. Enjoy Lepcha hospitality, food and folklore at Mayal Lyang in Dzongu, with leisurely walks to the Rongyung Chu river for angling. Stay at a heritage farmhouse with a Bhutia family at Yangsum Farm growing seasonal crops and fruits against the backdrop of the Kanchenjunga mountain. At Bon Farmhouse in Kewzing learn about organic farming, harvest millet, maize or seasonal vegetables and consume farm fresh milk, butter, curd and cottage cheese. Ziro, in the Lower Subansiri region of Arunachal Pradesh is known for ancient farming techniques of the Apatani tribe. Stay at Abasa Homestay at Siro nearby with State Tourism Award winner Kago Kampu, who grows organic vegetables and uses them inventively in salads and sautés served with chutneys of sunflower seeds and yokhung (*Zanthoxylum acanthopodium*). In Nagaland, watch Angamis carry out alder-based farming and terraced rice cultivation at Khonoma and trek to the scenic Dzukou Valley.

Getting there: Jet Airways offers daily flights to Guwahati and Dibrugarh.



Image courtesy Rainforest Retreat

▲ Above: Rainforest Retreat often hosts tourists who are happy to intern at their organic farms. Below: Dehusking coconuts in Kerala.



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Apple orchard stay

(Himachal Pradesh)

Though India was no stranger to the apple and the Kashmiri Ambri was a popular indigenous variety, Captain Lee and Alexander Couits were the first to plant English apples in Himachal. But it was an Indianised American Samuel 'Satyanand' Stokes who introduced the first apple saplings of the 'Starking Delicious' in 1916. Thanedar became one of the first apple plantations in the country and together with Kotgarh, constitutes the orchard region of Himachal Pradesh. Here cherries, strawberries and other fruits abound, and are processed into juices, jams, preserves and pickles. Stay at Apple Tree Cottage in Kotgarh (73 km from Shimla) or the Apple Orchard Inn of Krish Rauni.

When to go: Apple harvesting in Himachal is from July to October with August-September forming the peak season.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies to Delhi and Chandigarh, from where you can reach Himachal Pradesh by train or by road.



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▲ Above: Corn growing on the walls at the premises of a homestay in Arunachal Pradesh. Below: After a sweet yet scorching summer full of yellow mangoes, the rains revive the Konkan in a blaze of green.

Mango farms

(Konkan)

Maharashtra's Konkan region is renowned for its delicious hapoos or Alphonso mangoes from Ratnagiri and Devgad. In mango season, enthusiasts can buy cartons of this yellow goodness and even stay in a mango farm. Homestays like Atithi Parinay, set amidst mango, coconut and banana plantations on the banks of the Kusum offer 'eat as much you can' incentives. After a sweet yet scorching summer, the rains revive the Konkan in a blaze of green. At Maachli, the stream gurgling through the organic farm is the highlight of the monsoon and guests must wade through ankle-deep water to reach the property. Nandan Farms, a 12-acre plantation growing cashew, coconut, banana and pineapple offers stay in earthy cottages with mud walls and terracotta-tiled roofs.

When to go: Konkan offers something in every season—the best being mangoes in summer and waterfalls in monsoon.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies to Mumbai and Goa.

Fruit orchards & Bio-tourism

(Uttarakhand)

Snow clad peaks, forests of deodar, buraansh (rhododendron), oak and pine and orchard farms surrounded by untamed wilderness, Uttarakhand embraces you with the warmth of rustic mountain hospitality. Its ecologically sustainable model for bio-tourism spreads across 13 districts covering 1,200 bio villages. At Syath, a model village near Nainital, families trained in hospitality provide pahadi meals in village homes, arrange visits to waterfalls and waterfalls, with hands-on activities like organic farming techniques, milking cows, composting or fieldwork. Himalayan Village at Sonapani near Mukteshwar is a 20-acre organic farm growing apricots, apples, plum, peaches, vegetables and pulses.

Getting there: Jet Airways offers daily flights to Delhi and Dehradun.



Dimedia Photo



Image courtesy, Rainforest Retreat

Sea-buckthorn farming
(Spiti)

Sea-buckthorn first stormed the market as a wonder drink called Leh Berry developed by DRDO for the Indian army combating Ladakh's extreme climate. The orange berry possesses a unique mix of minerals,

vitamins and amino acids with anti-cancer and anti-ageing properties. In Spiti's desolate landscape, sea-buckthorn or tsirku (*Hippophae rhamnoides*) grew wild along riverbanks, with locals exploiting the shrub for fences and firewood. Spiti Sea-buckthorn Society, aided by 'Nono' Sonam Angdai, the King of Spiti and Spiti

Ecosphere, empowered villagers to harvest the berry through viable conservation means. The community initiative currently has 33 groups from 27 villages with over 500 members producing jam and juice concentrates, available under the brand name Tsering ('blessings for a long life' in Tibetan). Dried berry peels are shredded into refreshing tsirku tea. Watch villagers grow barley and pea, while staying at India's loftiest Himalayan homestays in traditional mud-brick homes overlooking snowy peaks. Explore fossil sanctuaries and go on yak safaris on the Spiti Left Bank trek, visiting high-altitude villages like Langza, Demul, Lhalung, Dhankar (Spiti's old capital) and Komik, the highest inhabited village in Asia.

When to go: Spiti has a cold, harsh desert environment, best suited for a visit during the main tourist season from May-October.

Getting there: Jet Airways flies to Delhi and Chandigarh, from where Spiti is accessible by road.



Image courtesy, Rainforest Retreat

Broom farming
(Meghalaya)

Ever wondered where the humble *phool jhadu* comes from? True to its name, it is the flowery inflorescence of *Thysanolaena maxima* plant, known simply as broom grass. Though it grows almost wild across the North East, Meghalaya and Karbi Anglong, its neighbouring district in Assam are leading areas of production. Primarily cultivated on slopes by the Tiwa, Karbi and Khasi communities as a mixed crop, the plant serves as a big cash crop for local farmers. In Meghalaya, head to Mawlynnong, which claims to be Asia's cleanest village. Stay in a community-run house on stilts made of bamboo and thatch. A walk down squeaky clean paths lined by flowers and fields of broom grass lead to amazing sights—living root bridges, relics of ancient Khasi tradition and Sky Bridge, a vantage point overlooking the plains of Bangladesh.

When to go: Meghalaya is good to visit post-monsoon. Harvesting starts from February and continues till March end. Almost 90 per cent of the produce is sold during March and April.

Getting there: Jet Airways offers daily flights to Guwahati from several cities in India. From Guwahati, Mawlynnong is about four hours away by road.



Dinodia Photo

▲ Above: Rainforest Retreat organises walking tours for children to teach them about forest ecosystems. Top: Buraansh (rhododendron) flowers bloom in Uttarakhand during the months of February and March.



Image courtesy Oyster Opera

▲ Above: Oyster Opera is a good place to learn how mussel farming is done on coir. Top: Once you've had your fill of holidays at plush resorts and hotels, spend a weekend sowing your own crop, and go back the next year to reap the benefits.