



Arti at Ganga Ghat on Deepwall

place for cremation and the Kedar Ghat has a shrine popular with Bengalis and South Indians. The liveliest is the Dashashwamedh ghat with daily evening aarti witnessed by thousands of people both from the boats and on the steps on the ghat. The spectacle is visually compelling with seven young men conducting an elaborate ceremony with puja, fire and music.

Varanasi has temples that you will stumble into at every step, literally. The most famous is the Kashi Viswanath temple, dedicated to Shiva and constructed in 1776 by Ahalya Bai of Indore. What struck me was the heavy security here which I am told is due to the presence of a mosque in the precincts of the temple to ensure no communal tensions. The temple only allows Hindus. After getting past through the layers of security checks, you reach the temple bustling with long queues of people waiting to reach the sanctum sanctorum.

The main deity is a Shiva Linga in the ground which is impossible to touch and you must take a good look at it before you are jostled and pushed out. But if you really want to experience spiritual serenity, I strongly recommend you Sarnath just 10 km away, famed for being the place where Buddha, upon being enlightened, gave his first sermon. Don't miss the Archaeological Museum of Sarnath and the Sarnath Excavation Site as well as the main temple here.

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Benarasi pan



There are several heritage walks conducted in the winding alleys of the old city which were built under the patronage of the Maratha empire. Stroll through the atmospheric Vishwanath Galli and the Dal Mandi, a former red light area now a bustling wholesale market. I would also recommend that you visit a traditional akhada or wrestling arena and I did that when I walked into the Guru Gaya Seth Akhada where you can see traditional wrestling forms where the wrestlers smear themselves with mud and fight it out. The top floor of this building also has traditional modern wrestling more popular with young boys. You can include a visit to a local goshala (cowshed), a cycle rickshaw ride and shopping for spices at Kinari Bazaar. And do sample the famed Benarasi paan and if you like buy the equally popular silk sarees. If you are vegetarian, Varanasi has a world of culinary delicacies that will leave your taste buds very satiated.

I strongly recommend that you have a traditional breakfast of *kachori subzi*, *puri-subzi* and *jalebis* at Shri Ram Bhandar at Nadesar, stop at the famous Blue Lassi, a cheerful hole-in-the-wall shop for a drink of creamy, fruity lassi and also sample *thandai* (with or without the *bhaang*) at Baba Thandai. As I leave the city, Mark Twain's words come to my mind, "Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together."



Evening puja in Dashashwamedh Ghat