



**The Durga Puja Festival of  
Kolkata and West Bengal  
9 Days/8 Nights  
September 23<sup>rd</sup> to October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017  
October 12<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**Activities**

**Overnight**

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly U.S. to Kolkata.	Kolkata
<b>Day 2</b>	<p><b>Chaturthi.</b> Morning visit to the Victoria Memorial. This domed Classical structure was completed in 1921 and features beautiful gardens, elegant sculptures of British notables and a rare collection of lithographs by Thomas and William Daniell. This will be followed by a tour of BBD Bagh, the heart of old Kolkata. This area contains a number of British colonial buildings dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, including St. John's Church, the General Post Office, the High Court, the Government House and the Writers' Building. Our next stop is the Pareshnath Jain Temple, a mosaic garden built in 1867 featuring extensive stone and mirror inlay work, stained glass, and European-style sculptures and fountains.</p> <p>Afternoon walking tour through Kumartuli, Area of the Potters, where the elaborate icons of Durga are sculpted and painted for the upcoming festival. Here we will learn about the rituals that surround the creation of the icons, such as the gathering of the clay from the rural villages of West Bengal, and the <i>Chakshu Daan</i> (Offering of the Eyes), the spiritual and artistic process by which the eyes are first painted on Goddess Durga. We will analyze the composition of different icons created for various neighborhoods and families, such as what accompanying Hindu deities and animals are included and why. We will also visit the many vendors that supply important accessories used in icon creation, such as artificial hair, silver and gold foil, and jeweled and beaded crowns and clothing.</p>	Kolkata
<b>Day 3</b>	<p><b>Panchami.</b> Morning visit to the bustling Malik Ghat flower market along the banks of the Hoogly River. Next we will visit the Indian Museum, the oldest and largest museum in India which houses an array of ancient artifacts, sculptures, coins and paintings. This will be followed by a walking tour through New Market, with its myriad of tiny shops selling everything from vegetables and meat to china, DVDs, perfume, jewelry and flowers. The afternoon is at your leisure to rest at your hotel in preparation for tonight's pandal hopping. Starting at 9 p.m., we will venture out to the city's largest and most elaborate pandals, some of which take up an entire city block. Besides admiring the exuberant color and over-the-top lighting found in these displays,</p>	Kolkata

we will enjoy a wide variety of puja styles, from the highly traditional to the refreshingly modern, all featuring carefully choreographed music, singing and dance performances. While the exact neighborhoods to be visited will depend upon what we “hear on the street” regarding which have the best pandals this year, a few areas that we will be sure to see include Maddox Square, Dum Dum Park and Telenga Bagan.

- Day 4**      **Shashthi.** This morning we will visit a number of elite family homes and temples in Kolkata to observe their private pujas; many of these families have been celebrating Durga Puja in Kolkata for more than 250 years. Some of the family pujas that we might visit today include those held by the descendents of Sabarna Roy Choudhury, Dr. Pratap Chandra Chandra, Dwarka Nath Dutta, Raja Nabakrishna Deb and Hatkhola Dutta. We will learn how many of the traditional puja rituals have changed over the years due to law or circumstance, such as the practice of animal sacrifice, the shooting of cannons, the distribution of gold coins by family priests, and the release of Neelkanth birds (the magnificent Indian Roller) during the final icon immersion on Vijayadashami. In contrast to the paper and glass ornaments worn by the typical neighborhood icon, in these elite homes we will see Goddess Durga (and many family members) adorned with spectacular gold and silver jewelry for the festival. Afternoon departure for the Birbhum district of West Bengal, arriving in time for dinner. Bolpur
- Day 5**      **Saptami.** Morning visit to several villages around Bolpur to admire their different puja festivities. In the vicinity of Kirnahr village, we will witness the family puja of the descendents an old feudal lord of Bolpur. A unique aspect to the village pujas of West Bengal is their highly communal nature; even the most elite families open their homes and kitchens to neighboring families and villagers. Bolpur
- Afternoon visit to Shantiniketan, founded in 1921 by Rabindrinath Tagore, a revered poet, writer, musician and playwright and the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Tagore founded Shantiniketan (now Visva Bharati University) with the goal of creating a traditional Indian system of education in which gurus teach their disciples in open air, with an emphasis on the arts, humanities and Bengali culture. Here we will view outdoor artwork by contemporary masters such as Nandalal Bose, Ram Kinkar Baij and Binod Bihari Mukherjee. We will also visit several textile villages around Bolpur, including those known for their batik work, tasar silk weaving and *kantha* embroidery. *Kantha* blends floral, animal and geometric thread designs with images depicting the day-to-day life and culture of the rural women of West Bengal. This evening you will be treated to a musical performance by a troupe of Bauls, mystical singers from West Bengal whose songs are highly nuanced and layered with meaning. In keeping with our Durga Puja theme, the Bauls will include several songs about women, celestial love and divine feminine energy.
- Day 6**      **Ashtami.** Morning drive to Bishnupur, stopping en route at the village of Bikna, where they create primitive metal sculpture using the *dhokra* technique, a form of lost-wax casting. Afternoon tour of Bishnupur, known for its jewel-box terracotta temples. The Shyama Raya temple was built in 1643 and is completely covered with terracotta friezes depicting scenes from the Ramayana Bishnupur

and the life of Lord Krishna. The Rasa Mancha temple resembles a flattened pyramid and features 108 symmetric pillars around its base. After dinner we will return again to these temples, which are beautifully illuminated every evening. This afternoon we will also enjoy the unique Durga Puja festival of Bishnupur, believed to be the oldest such celebration in West Bengal, dating back to the reign of Raja Jagatsingh Deb in 997 A.D. In this small town, the Durga idol is not immersed on Vijayadashami; rather, each year, a fresh layer of clay is applied to the idol and flowers and leaves are symbolically immersed in a nearby pond.

**Day 7** **Navami.** Morning visit to a village of potters that create the region's famed Bankura horse votives out of red terracotta. This will be followed by a visit to local Baluchari sari weavers, whose magnificent silk-on-silk embroidered textiles and garments are sought after by women all over India. Our tour returns to Kolkata this afternoon in preparation for Vijayadashami, the last day of the festival, when thousands of Durga idols are carried to the Hoogly river for ritual immersion.

Kolkata

**Day 8** **Vijayadashami.** This morning you are free to relax at your hotel. After lunch, we will join the married women of Kolkata as they celebrate their auspicious status by placing *sindur* (vermillion powder) on each other's hair and face. During the sindur ceremony, women bid farewell to Durga and wish for each other's happiness and the longevity of their married life. After the ceremony, we will accompany the women and their icons to the river, boarding a private boat for a better view of the idol immersions. These immersions represent many things to devotees, such as Durga's victory over evil and her reunification with her husband Shiva. As we watch the proceedings, we will discuss the environmental impact of widespread idol immersion in India and the efforts now underway to mitigate this impact, such as the introduction of non-hazardous paints and the recovery and recycling of raw materials from the river.

Kolkata

**Day 9** Depart Kolkata for U.S. or other destinations in India

