

Top 5 Homestays in India

BY PRITI SALIAN

Travelling to India? *Experience its true culture by checking into a homestay.*



Aanavilasam Luxury Plantation House, Thekkady

Surrounded by a pristine cardamom and pepper plantation, Aanavilasam was converted into a luxury homestay in 2009. Home to photographer and tourism book publisher Salim Pushpanath, this property houses suites, pool villas and a presidential suite which range from \$140 to \$370 CDN per night and include breakfast and dinner for two people. The luxurious suites have French doors that open onto an oversized private living room, a veranda and views of the surrounding hillsides and cardamom plants, and feature a king-size bed, a pantry, a refrigerator and spacious bathroom. There's also an excellent bird life at Aanavilasam; no less than 26 species, according to Pirkko Paxton, the Finnish hostess who takes care of the homestay when Pushpanath travels. Like any good homestay in India, the hosts do a lot of planning for you which includes nature walks, elephant rides, bamboo rafting and visits to the Periyar Tiger Reserve which is only 15 minutes away. You can also walk up to the nearby village to experience Kerala life. "What our guests enjoy the most is the quiet and tranquil location of our home, attention to detail in the rooms, the rain shower in the garden and the plantation tour we take them out for," Paxton says.

www.aanavilasam.com

Jaipur Friendly Villa, Jaipur

A home away from home and a safe haven is how guests like to describe Jaipur Friendly Villa. Situated in a secure locality, the villa is just 20 minutes away from the main tourist destinations. Three room types — standard, superior and deluxe superior — range from \$40 to \$55 CDN per night and you can expect air conditioning or heating, cable television, a large jacuzzi, a pressurized shower and cubicle, and hot and cold running water all day. The breakfast, your choice of Indian or continental,

is the most appreciated freebie of the package. All this, plus the home is immaculately clean and hygienic with handcrafted woodwork. But what sets this home apart from some other facilities in Jaipur is the kind hospitality of the homeowners Kulbhushan and Shveta Mehra. The well-informed hosts will have long chats with you over tea or beer, not to mention the cooking lessons they offer their guests. "When I opened the doors to my home five years back it was to fill my quiet house with visitors, but what I didn't know was that they would fill my heart with so much affection in turn," Shveta says.

www.jaipurfriendlyvilla.com

Saubhag Bed and Breakfast, New Delhi

Saubhag Bed and Breakfast is a great way to begin and end a trip to India if you're landing in New Delhi. Located in Central Delhi, 1.25 miles from the Karol Bagh metro station, this facility is actually a homestay, much against what its name reveals. But it was ranked the number one homestay in India, and second in Asia, in TripAdvisor's 2013 Travellers' Choice Awards. While the package (about \$50 CDN) covers the cost of your breakfast, "food is always available in an Indian kitchen," enthuses Meera Dass, the very affable owner of Saubhag. Dass is always there to greet guests even at the oddest hours and is willing to plan itineraries, book tickets and arrange transportation for them. Her guests vouch for the extra personal attention they get from her which sometimes includes driving them to the railway station and setting them up in their seats or accompanying them to a local restaurant. The homestay is basic, as it is just an extension of Dass's own home, but it is very clean and tastefully decorated. What's kept Dass's spirits high for the last five years are the friends she's made who touch her heart time and again with their lovely words and gifts.

www.saubhagbedandbreakfast.com



JAIPUR FRIENDLY VILLA



Aapo Aap Homestay, Shimla

What started as a spiritual meditation and yoga retreat for owner Shivi Kanwar, turned into a homestay two and a half years ago. Located on the Sargheen-Panthaghati ridge, Aapo Aap is about 20 minutes away from Mall Road, the most happening street in Shimla. The homestay has five well-appointed rooms (starting at \$50 CDN per night) and one self-service apartment with a regular kitchen (starting at \$335 CDN per week). Besides breakfast and dinner, they offer electric heaters and blankets, hot water, television and broadband in the rooms, and a quiet world away from the hustle and bustle of the main city. The rooms have balconies and a spectacular view which can be enjoyed while sipping tea or coffee that the helpful staff of Aapo Aap are glad to serve. A big plus is its proximity to attractions like the Satya Sai Baba Temple, the Nyingmapa Monastery and the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual Organization. "We serve the choicest Himachali meals but the cook can happily rustle up a few omelettes and fries if our guests desire," Kanwar says. So, if you're looking for a homestay in Shimla with an excellent host that assists with itinerary, pick-ups, tours and any other information about travel in North India, Aapo Aap is the place to stay.

www.aapoaapshimla.com

Laika Boutique Stay, Bangalore

Home to a warm and welcoming family, this is one of Bangalore's best homestays, especially if you want to be close to all the action in the city. Located conveniently just off Mahatma Gandhi Road and near the metro, this homestay offers eight rooms (\$90 CDN per night including a lavish breakfast). Cooking classes that include a trip to the vegetable market to choose the ingredients, personalized itineraries and shopping tours are some of the extras you'll love about Laika and Ajith's home. Their homestay is modern with a heritage look. Be it the timber on the gates which has been obtained from Indian Railways or the Goan mosaic tiles on the tables, the house has Indian culture through and through. "I collected a lot of things for my house from torn down vintage buildings," says Laika, the proud owner of this home. But when you leave Laika Boutique Stay, you won't only be discussing its looks. You'll want to come back for the hosts' kindness and the sumptuous meals they offer. ä

www.laikabangalore.in