

## **Varanasi & Cremation On The Ghats**

Varanasi, the mystical city in the state of Uttar Pradesh famous for the ancient tradition of cremation ceremonies and for being the holiest, most sacred city in India. Home to over a million people, Varanasi, otherwise known as Benares, is a 5000-year-old city which rests along the left bank of the Ganges (Ganga River). Depicted in stories, paintings, and many movies as the smoky place where bodies are cremated and people bathe in the Ganges, Varanasi is a cultural city of North India and the spiritual centre of the country. Despite the travel bucket list bloggers who love to write about bodies floating in the river and pyres burning with arms and legs sticking out, Varanasi is one of the most soul-stirring, hauntingly beautiful places on earth. Whether you are offering a lotus flower to the welcoming Ganges, or witnessing a cremation ceremony on one of the ghats, Varanasi will educate, impress, and take you back a few thousand years each and every time you visit.

As you approach Varanasi you will be amazed at the orange and golden hues of this ancient city. Yes, cows will block the road and there is the usual chaos that is a part of India, however, there is a peaceful, yet exuberant, vibe in Varanasi that is unlike anywhere else in the world. The Hindu people believe that dying and being cremated in Varanasi and having their ashes rest in the Ganges will bring them salvation/nirvana, thereby breaking the cycle of death and rebirth. Many Hindus travel to Varanasi when they begin to have bad health so that they may have their last days in their holy city. Similarly, pilgrims also travel from all over India, and beyond, to immerse themselves in the sacred Ganges water. Believed to have power to cleanse away sins and impurities of the body, one can see the daily bathing and rituals along the Ganges each morning as devout Hindus wash away their soils of the material world.

### **Morning Along The Ganges**

One of the most beautiful times of day in Varanasi is when the sun rises over the Ganges. To sit in one of the little wooden riverboats along the Ganges and witness the appearance of the sun is an amazing start to the day. Varanasi is dedicated to Lord Shiva because it is believed to have been Lord Shiva's home and during sunrise, devotees along the Ganges pay respect to Lord Shiva as well. Despite all the chatter about this incredible, historic body of water, there is an otherworldly sensation that you feel when you're floating along this tranquil river. Similarly, to have the opportunity to sit on the ghats and watch the sunrise in Varanasi is an experience unlike anywhere else in the world. It is as though you are taking your soul on a walk down memory lane, a familiar calm seems to reside deep within you and it's divinely indescribable.

The Ganges plays a very important role in the life along the ghats because, what is believed to be the sacred water of the Ganges, is used to purify and clean the body of both the living and the dead. During the early morning hours, you can see men and women bathing in the water and performing their personal prayers and rituals. This is a daily routine for the people of Varanasi and an opportunity for pilgrims who travel to Varanasi to immerse themselves in the sacred water too.

### **Cremation Ceremonies Along The Ganges**

There are many theories as to why cremation ceremonies in India began such as, purification of the body, to release the soul from a polluted body, and to symbolize the transitory nature of life; of destruction and rebirth. Regardless why cremation began, for Hindu people death is viewed as an escape from one life to salvation or nirvana and, despite mourning for a loved

one, death is viewed in a positive light. Obviously, a tragic death or death of a child will be different, however, in general death is seen as a progressive step toward moksha, or freedom.

If a person is lucky enough to be in Varanasi when they die, regardless of their religion, they are offered the opportunity to be cremated on the ghats along the Ganges and have their ashes offered to the river. Typically, the preparation for the cremation starts immediately when the person dies as the family members wrap the body and take it to the Ganges, this usually happens within 5-7 hours of the person's death. Due to the heat in Varanasi, and the quick rate at which a body starts to decompose, time is of the essence in preparing the body for cremation. Once at the river, the family will rest the body along the bank of the Ganges to purify the soul and to also wash the body. The family then needs to pay for about the wood needed for the cremation. The wood is then shaped into the form of a bed for the body to rest upon. To show respect for the deceased person, a male in the family will cut his own hair, moustache, or beard to show respect for the family member that has passed. The fellow then goes to the Ganges and bathes to purify himself before he adorns himself in white clothing which is the colour of mourning in India. Next, with the body now resting on the wood, the family walks around the body five times. Walking around the body five times represents the five elements of water, fire, earth, space, and air. The funeral pyre of the deceased is now lit and the burning of the body begins. After about three hours, the family members at the funeral mix the deceased person's ashes with flowers they have collected and put it all in a large clay pot. The family goes out onto the river and releases the relatives' ashes to the Ganges, hence, releasing the soul to achieve nirvana.

Every trip to India should include a trip to Varanasi to see the cremation ceremonies. Will you see a dead body floating in the river? No, not if you don't want to and especially not if you're out on a riverboat embracing the beautiful tradition from the water. Will you see bodies floating out in the river decomposing from your boat? Absolutely not! Despite what some people write about Varanasi and the Aarti and cremation ceremonies, the experience is exquisitely moving and enlightening. Your ears are awakened by the heavenly chants and majestic sounds as they resonate through the air. The flashes of brilliant white and golden light from the flames of the Aarti ceremony dance before your eyes as if tempting you and drawing you in. As in most of India, the fragrant smoke from the incense is an inviting aroma that evokes a feeling of tranquility. But, most of all, you are witnessing the transcendence of a soul to, what most believe, to be a place of salvation or nirvana, and the experience will change you for the better and forever.

Explore India Journeys Inc. can offer you such a trip to Varanasi as described here. The experience is an awakening in the most profound and beautiful way, and an Explore India tour, or a Varanasi extension of any of Explore India's tours, is an absolute must for anyone travelling to India. Imagine setting upon a riverboat that is going to majestically float you to an experience of sites and sounds that will stir something so captivatingly wonderful for you that you feel a profound shift in your being, a shift for the better that will stay with you for the rest of your life. Call Explore India today, and let your spiritual awakening begin. [Explore India](#) and feel the magic that will change your life.

#### **Title**

Varanasi, Soul-Stirring Cremation Ceremony Along Ganges

#### **Description**

Hauntingly beautiful pyres burning 300 bodies per day for thousands of years. A mystical experience of witnessing the ancient tradition of cremation in Varanasi