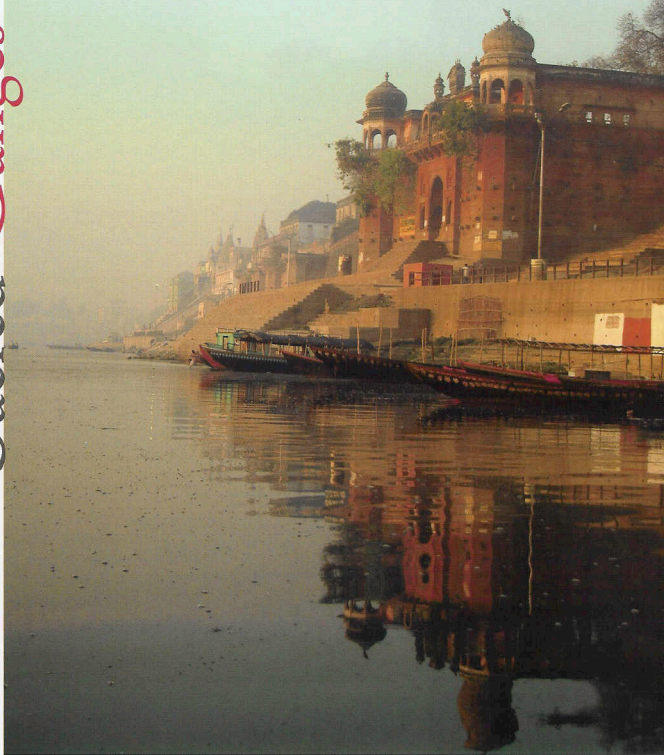


# Sacred Ganges



**O**n its fertile banks, empires, civilizations and cities have flourished from as early as 1500BC. From high in the Himalayan gorges, its divine waters hurriedly rush down into the valley, flowing impetuously, nourishing the plains. In summer, it bursts its banks, reclaiming its turf as it engulfs the edges of city streets and country terrain. Winding some 1500 miles through the land on its way to the Bay of Bengal, the River Ganges' life-giving waters provide sustenance and spirituality to sadhus, pilgrims, weavers, farmers and all who live along its banks.



Hands around a circle.

**IF YOU GO:**

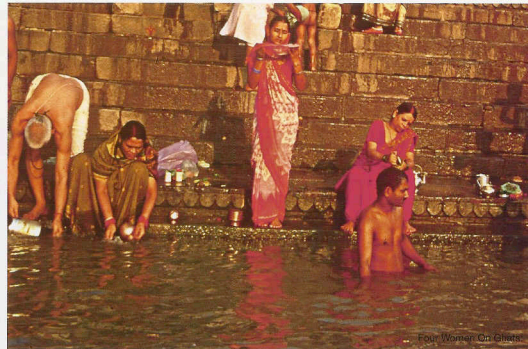
Away from the river, several hotels offer sumptuous lodging.

**Radisson Hotel Varanasi:**

[www.radisson.com](http://www.radisson.com).

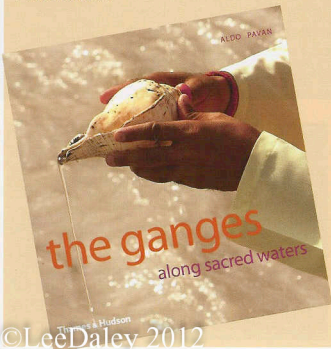
**Taj Ganges:** Good travel desk, excellent service, horse-drawn carriage rides to the ghats for a boat ride on the river  
[www.tajhotels.com](http://www.tajhotels.com).

On the Ganges itself, at Asi Ghat, the lovely Ganga View Guesthouse provides a comfortable haven. You can breakfast on its open air upstairs terrace with cane furnishings and a view over the ghats. A buffet vegetarian dinner is served in the common room where guests mingle and exchange travelers' tales. Elegant in their simplicity, the guest rooms feature marble floors and French doors. Spiritual ambience.



Four Women On Ghats

Varanasi, one of the oldest cities in the world, contains the most sacred stretch of this life-giving force. Sanctified by Shiva's eternal presence, the city is foremost among the 12 sites where the god burrowed and then burst into the atmosphere in a brilliant column of light. Here the river is lined for three miles with about 90 broad steps, called ghats, backed by a cliff-like array of temples, shrines and towers. Because the "City of Light" sits on the Ganges' west bank with the river flowing south to north, dawn here is a fabulous sight. Across the river, fields and trees on its east bank embrace the first light of day. As the sun rises, casting a golden glow on the holy waters and on the bathing ghats, its light warms the splendid temples and shrines above the steps. Shifting the sky's colors from pink to purple to blue, the sun continues its ascent. On the ghats, priests perform a ritual called aarti by repeatedly hoisting a flaming brazier skyward. Devout Hindus take a purifying dip, saying personal prayers. It's a timeless scene, a living fresco that resonates with the ongoing cycle of Hindu religious practices from daily rituals to far-reaching rites of passage. Here is where the living come to seek the blessings of Shiva and Mother Ganga. And here, at the end of life, many of the faithful spend their last days marking their transition into another stage of being.

**> Book Review**

## The GANGES Along Sacred Waters

By Aldo Pavan

(Thames & Hudson, 335 pages, \$50)

Author Aldo Pavan and his camera trace the route of the Ganges, capturing its beauty and its many different phases and moods in this beautifully illustrated coffee table tome. He introduces us to those whose lives are spent along the river banks as his vividly colorful photographs take us from the Himalayan glaciers to the "thousand-fingered Delta." The journey captures vivid scenes as it encounters the vast plain, the sacred waters of Varanasi, the flat state of Bihar where legend tells us the Buddha attained enlightenment and then on to Bengal where the grandiose Vidyasagar Setu bridge spans the river on its path through Calcutta.

Near the source of the Ganges, a photograph of a striking shrine dedicated to Shiva wordlessly captures the starkness of its rock-strewn windswept environment. In all, the photographer's nearly 300 photographs—most in color—make this book a compelling view of India's deep love and respect for this great river whose power affects all within its sphere.