



A woman gives offerings to the goddess Durga during Durga Puja

Bengali New Year (14 or 15 April)

This festival - also called Nabo Barsho or Poila Boishakh - kick-starts the annual Bengali calendar. Although superseded by the Gregorian calendar that governs most aspects of public life in the region, the Bengali calendar has a steadfast grip on Bengal's cultural affairs, and is still used to determine auspicious dates for occasions such as pujas (prayer rituals) and weddings. It's no surprise then that Kolkata marks the beginning of this cultural almanac with a flood of celebrations scattered across the city, including colourful public processions at dawn, musical concerts, fetes, theatre performances, dance competitions and poetry sessions. It's also easily the best occasion to enjoy authentic local food, as specialty restaurants in town such as Kewpies, 6 Ballygunge Place, Bhojohari Manna and Aaheli all plate up the best of traditional Bengali cuisine for hordes of diners.

Kali Puja (October to November)

Observed about three weeks after Durga Puja, this overnight festival dedicated to Kali - another demon-slaying incarnation of the Hindu mother goddess - coincides with Diwali, the pan-Indian festival of lights. Across Kolkata, pandals (more modest than their Durga Puja variants) are constructed to house and worship idols of the goddess, to the accompaniment of incantations, mantra recitals and other rites. As the invocations continue long into the night, families light up their homes with the moody glow of candles (and in these modern times, LED-powered fairy lights), as the sky is set aflame with the stellar spider-trails of exploding fireworks.

Kolkata Film Festival (November)

The extremely popular Kolkata Film Festival marks the city's annual date with the best of Indian and international films, which are curated from more than 60 countries and screened over a week. Most screenings happen at the government-run, state-of-the-art theatres within the Nandan Complex, although a few other cinemas across the city are also pulled in for a select number of shows. Apart from showcasing the best commercial, art-house and documentary films, the festival also organises special programs featuring works of eminent directors, as well as interactions and discussions with people from the film industries in India and around the world.

Kolkata Book Fair (January to February)

Reputedly one of the world's largest book fairs, and often grouped with the legendary London and Frankfurt Book Fairs in terms of book volume and number of attendees, the Kolkata Book Fair is a gargantuan annual jamboree that draws close to 2.5 million people over its two-week duration. More than 350 publishers assemble at the fair and open up their catalogues to academics, scholars, book collectors, schoolchildren and bibliophiles in general. Every year, a wide selection of books from a featured foreign country is also presented, with the aim of in-

troducing local readers to diverse literary traditions from around the world. If that's not enough, the fair also provides an impromptu late-winter picnic within the fairgrounds, with delicious snacks sold at food stalls (the crumb-fried fish is a timeless favourite) and intellectual discussions led by leading lights from literature and art, world politics and sports. These luminaries are joined by an army of street artists, poets and musicians, giving visitors a sampling of their artistic offerings, from hand-drawn sketches to independently produced CDs and self-published poem booklets. — www.lonelyplanet.com



The popular Kolkata Film Festival takes place each year at the Nandan Complex