

Rajasthan – Wildlife & History

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Depart London.
Day 2	Delhi; overnight train to Bikaner.
Day 3	Half day at Bikaner; transfer to Gajner.
Day 4	Gajner Wildlife Reserve.
Day 5	Jaisalmer via Khichan.
Day 6/7	Jaisalmer and excursion to Thar Desert.
Day 8	Rohetgarh.
Day 9	Bishnoi and Khaira Dam. Overnight Rohetgarh.
Day 10	Jodhpur.
Day 11/13	Ranthambore Tiger Reserve.
Day 14/15	Jaipur.
Day 16	Bharatpur.
Day 17	Delhi, via Taj Mahal.
Day 18	Fly London.

Corbett National Park extension

Day 18/20	Corbett National Park.
Day 21	Delhi.
Day 22	Fly London.



From top: Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, Blackbuck and Demoiselle Cranes



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Dates

2020

Sunday 25th October – Wednesday 11th November 2020 Cost: £4,595
Extension to Corbett National Park: to Sunday 15th November 2020 Cost: £995

2021

Sunday 24th January – Wednesday 10th February 2021 Cost: £4,595
Extension to Corbett National Park: to Sunday 14th February 2021 Cost: £995

Sunday 24th October – Wednesday 10th November 2021 Cost: £4,595
Extension to Corbett National Park: to Sunday 14th November 2021 Cost: £995

2022

Sunday 23rd January – Wednesday 9th February 2022 Cost: £4,795
Extension to Corbett National Park: to Sunday 13th February 2022 Cost: £995

Sunday 23rd October – Wednesday 9th November 2022 Cost: £4,795
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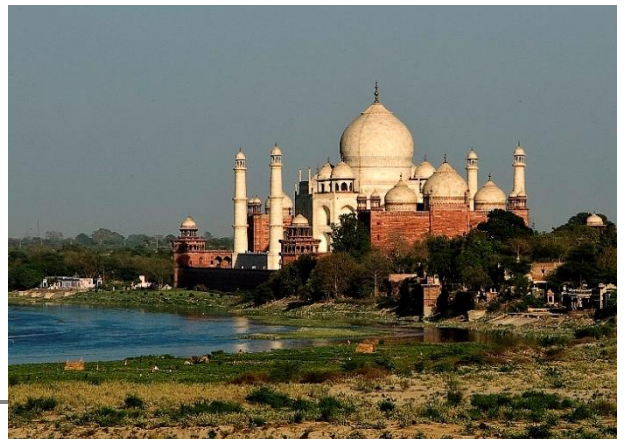
Single room supplement

From £795 (Extension: £295)

£500 reduction if booked without flights, land only trip.

Highlights

- Stay in Maharajah palaces
- Look for Great Indian & Macqueen's Bustards in the Thar Desert
- Enjoy the spectacle of thousands of Demoiselle Cranes
- Cream-coloured Courser & Desert Foxes among highlights, Thar Desert
- Travel through beautiful villages & learn about the Bishnoi people
- 3-night stay at Ranthambore Tiger Reserve in search of Tiger, Sloth Bear & Leopard
- Pheasant-tailed Jacana & Brown Fish Owl among special birds, Ranthambore
- Visit to the unforgettable Taj Mahal
- Guided tour of Jaipur including the Amber Palace, Hawa Mahal & Observatory
- Option to extend holiday in Corbett National Park
- Led by expert naturalist guides





Sloth Bear



Tawny Eagle



Demoiselle Cranes



Royal Bengal Tiger "Arrowhead"



Great Stone-Curlew



Sloth Bear



Painted Sandgrouse



Plum-headed Parakeet

Introduction

An 18-day wildlife holiday to Rajasthan focusing on the Great Thar Desert, Ranthambore and Bharatpur, including visits to the historical cities of Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Jaipur and Agra. The tour can be extended to include three nights in Corbett National Park, set in the foothills of the Himalaya.

Beyond the rich tapestries of colour, noise and confusion that characterize the cities and countryside of the Gangetic plain lies a desolate wilderness of breathtaking beauty. Scattered amongst the Thar Desert's 700,000 square kilometres can be found a patchwork of habitats that together create a last stronghold for some of India's most threatened wildlife. Among the region's ever-shifting sand dunes sit rocky outcrops, pockets of scrub forest and remnants of savannah grassland which provide vestiges of a once vast, but now vanishing, landscape. Quiet and peaceful, but always colourful, this desert holds many surprises. Resplendent Rajput peoples in their gaudy turbans and scarves, desert citadels, eerie forts and Maharajahs' retreats provide the backdrop to this unique and exciting natural history tour.

We begin in Delhi, and enjoy the birdlife and sights of the city before travelling by overnight train to Bikaner, situated on the edge of the Thar Desert. After exploring this old royal city, we continue to Gajner Wildlife Reserve, where we will stay in the old palace of the Maharajah of Bikaner for two nights. This little-known, private reserve is a former hunting ground of the Maharajahs, the quiet seclusion of its lake and acacia woodlands today offering us fine birdwatching opportunities. In particular, we hope to observe large gatherings of Blackbellied Sandgrouse as they come to drink at the lake each morning and evening. Our exploration of the Thar, or Great Indian, Desert now begins in earnest as we travel next to the magnificent citadel of Jaisalmer, stopping en route to enjoy the spectacle of thousands of Demoiselle Cranes attracted to the village of Khichan through generations of feeding by the locals. With its intricate stonework, minarets, palaces and proud and colourful people, Jaisalmer is a reminder of the Rajput past of the Thar. From here we will do a full day's excursion to the Thar Desert National Park, where we will look for both Great Indian Bustard and Macqueen's Bustard, the latter a winter visitor to the Thar. Although sadly both species are now very rare due to habitat loss and hunting, we would be unlucky to miss the former. Other desert birdlife includes Chestnut-bellied and Spotted Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser and the enigmatic Stoliczka's Bushchat. Amongst the desert mammals we may see are the elegant Chinkara (or Indian Gazelle), Indian and Desert Foxes and perhaps even the increasingly uncommon Blackbuck, Wolf or Striped Hyena.

On completion of our desert safari, we will travel to the beautiful village of Rohetgarh, where we will spend two nights. Nearby live the Bishnoi, a unique tribe of practicing naturalists ... and the world's first environmentalists! Continuing to Jodhpur, we visit the Mehrangarh Fort — one of the largest forts in India — and Jaswant Thada, a 19th century royal cenotaph built in white marble. Next we travel to Ranthambore Tiger Reserve for a 3-night stay which offers a magnificent setting in which to search for Tigers and other wildlife. Set in the Aravali Hills, the dry deciduous jungles of Ranthambore are dominated by the impressive ruins of a massive 11th century fortress and by Moghul monuments that nestle discreetly on the shores of small lakes. In addition to Tiger, we also hope to find Spotted and Sambar Deer, Nilgai, Wild Boar and Common Langur, and if fortunate, perhaps even a Sloth Bear or Leopard! Birds are abundant and include flocks of colourful Peafowl, plus Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Brown Fish Owl, Small Minivet and Rufous-tailed Lark, an Indian endemic. Moving on, we have two nights to explore Jaipur, 'the Pink City' and a chance to visit Hawa Mahal, 'the Palace of Winds', the Amber Fort and the city palace residence of the Maharajah of Jaipur. We will then visit Bharatpur, one of India's finest birdwatching sites, before driving to the greatest monument of Moghul India: the Taj Mahal.

We will return to Delhi by train to complete our tour of the magical and exotic state of Rajasthan. However, for those of you wishing to extend your stay, our extension to the north-east into the scenic forested hills and wide river valleys of Corbett National Park is thoroughly recommended.

Day 1

Sunday

In Flight

We depart from London on direct British Airways scheduled flight to Delhi at 1855. We will be in flight overnight.

Day 2

Monday

Delhi; overnight train to Bikaner

Upon our arrival at 0855, we will be transferred to a 5-star hotel, usually The Pullman Hotel New Delhi for a convenient access to the Delhi airport, (we cannot guarantee a particular hotel, but always endeavor to book one of a high standard not far from the airport) to freshen up. The hotel features an array of eclectic and exciting eateries. Whether you're looking for a quick bite while you're on the go or a comfortable setting in which to savour a meal, tantalizing options, are at hand. We may also make use of its facilities, which include a pool and a Spa and health centre before the next phase of our journey.



Shikra

Later, in the afternoon there will be a birdwatching trip to Sultanpur National Park and Bird Sanctuary, 13 miles from our hotel. Sultanpur covers 1.5 sq km and was declared a bird sanctuary in 1971 and was upgraded to the status of national park in 1991 by the Haryana Government. This is an ideal birding spot; large numbers of migratory species arrive each year. The habitat is a mix of wetland, woodland and grassland. In the wetland area several trees have been planted on the mounds, which provide good nesting and perching opportunities for birds.

Bird species of particular interest includes: White Pelican, Little Cormorant, Painted Stork, Black-headed Ibis, Little Egret, Great Egret, Spot-billed Duck, Eurasian Thick-knee, Red-wattled Lapwing, Black-winged Stilt, Black tailed Godwit, Spotted Redshank, Shikra, Grey Francolin, Black Francolin, Indian Roller, White-throated Kingfisher, India Crested Lark, Red-vented Bulbul, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Laughing Dove, Spotted Owlet, Magpie Robin,

Greater Coucal, Hoopoe, Purple Sunbird, Baya Weaver, Bank Myna, Common Myna, Blue-tailed and Green bee-eaters, Bluethroat, Paddyfield Pipit, and Long-billed Pipit.

We will travel in air-conditioned sleeper carriages to Bikaner, which is one of the more comfortable ways to travel across India. It is also a good way of witnessing typical scenes of Indian life when the train stops – vendors ply their wares amid the crowded platforms, each competing with their rivals to make the most noise!

Day 3

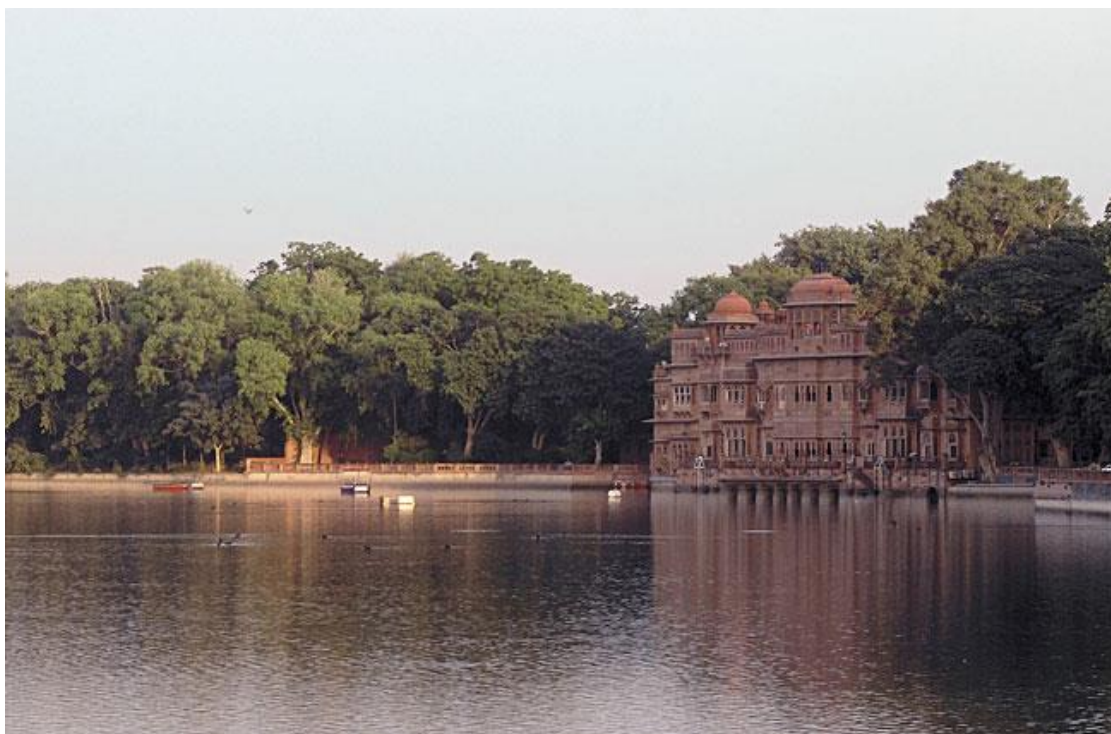
Tuesday

Bikaner – Gajner

Arriving early in the morning at Bikaner we will be transferred to the comfortable Lallgarh Palace Hotel, where there will be a chance to freshen up before we start our sightseeing and birdwatching tour of the city.

The fortified city of Bikaner is encircled by imposing battlements and stands on a slight eminence. Its roads undulate through colourful bazaars and the predominant hue of the buildings is the strong reddish pink of local sandstone. The Junagarh Fort was built by Raja Rai Singh who was an outstanding general of the Moghul Emperor, Akbar. It is encircled by a moat and contains palaces made of red sandstone and marble, with kiosks and balconies embellishing the structure at intervals.

After some sightseeing we will drive to Gajner where we'll stay at the Gajner Palace for two nights. Gajner Palace, a summer resort of Bikaner Maharajahs, has been described as 'an incomparable jewel in the Thar desert'. Built by Maharajah



Ganga Singh Ji of Bikaner, the palace stands on the embankment of a lake. It was formerly used by the Maharajah for grand shoots and lavish entertainment of both Indian and international royalty, viceroys and many other dignitaries. The architecture of Gajner Palace is truly outstanding. Built in red sandstone with intricately carved pillars, jharokhas (Moghul overhanging balconies) and screens, it is a monument to the craftsmanship of the builders. A part of the palace has now been transformed into a hotel, and our stay here will allow us a taste of the location's grandeur.

Day 4

Wednesday

Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary

Today we will have a morning and afternoon safaris in the Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary. This small sanctuary includes a lake that teems with wintering waterbirds and wildfowl, while the surrounding forest and scrub-desert affords protection for Chinkara, Nilgai, Wild Boar and Blackbuck. Large numbers of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse visit the Sanctuary to take advantage of the valuable water source in this arid region. We will travel in open-topped jeeps and the day is sure to provide an interesting introduction to the fauna of the Rajasthan desert.

Day 5

Thursday

Desert City of Jaisalmer

This morning we will drive from Gajner to Jaisalmer, a legendary desert city that brings to life the images of an Arabian Nights fable. Improbably sited in the midst of a harsh desert terrain, the city is steeped in history and was sustained for centuries by the camel caravans bringing traders from other parts of India and the Middle East. On our way to Jaisalmer, we also visit Khichan which is a renowned site for gatherings of Demoiselle Cranes. From September to March hundreds of Demoiselle Cranes descend on the fields around the village and they have become remarkably tolerant of human activity, making them ideal subjects for photography. This is probably the single best location in the world to observe these graceful cranes, which annually complete a remarkable migration across the Himalayan massif.



In the afternoon we will go to the Magistrate's office to obtain permits for visiting the Desert National Park.

We will stay in a comfortable Gateway Hotel Rawalkot Jaisalmer for three nights. The Gateway Hotel is the perfect combination of modern comfort and medieval charm. Guests can enjoy views of the 12th century Jaisalmer Fort and appreciate how the scenery changed from sunrise to sunset. The hotel also have a Swimming Pool, Health Club and a Spa.

Day 6

Friday

Jaisalmer (Desert National Park)

We leave early in the morning today for an excursion to the Desert National Park. A visit here provides an excellent way of seeing the Thar Desert's unique ecosystem and rich fauna at first hand.

We will see a variety of desert landscapes, including sand dunes (these form less than 20 per cent of the Park), craggy rocks, pavements and compact salt lake bottoms, intermedial areas and fixed dunes. The Sudashri forest post is one of the best places to observe wildlife in the Desert National Park and will be one of our first destinations. We will make safari trip into the Park either on camel carriages or on foot.

Inhabitants of the Park include the Blackbuck, Chinkara, Wolf, Indian Fox, Desert Fox, Hare and Desert Cat. Flights of sandgrouse begin arriving at waterholes from sunrise onwards and again at dusk, when flock after flock converges from the surrounding countryside to sip these



precious sources of water. Chestnut-bellied and Painted are the two commonest types of breeding sandgrouse in the Park, but other species such as Spotted and Black-bellied may occur here during the winter months, so careful observation is always necessary to ensure correct identification. Another common resident that regularly visits the pools is the Grey Francolin. This big chicken-like bird has a loud, distinctive call and is often the first noise heard at daybreak. Blue-tailed and Green Bee-eaters, Drongos and Indian Rollers also frequent the waterholes.



Perhaps the most important avian resident of the Park is the severely endangered Great Indian Bustard. A huge, stately bird, this bustard requires large undisturbed areas in which to breed, and with the ever-expanding human population of India demanding more and more countryside the bustard's range has steadily contracted. This is a species that cannot easily coexist with man and it is only in large unspoilt places such as the Thar Desert that it can still be found. The sight of a bustard flock picking its way through a weedy field, or flying in chevron formation across the

desert, will be one of the most indelible images of a visit to Thar.

There is a great deal of other vivid and spectacular birdlife to see in this Park as well. Short-toed and Bimaculated Larks live here, and several species of shrikes are commonly seen. Demoiselle Cranes and the rare Macqueen's Bustard are two rare, sought-after visitors which arrive in the winter months. Birds of prey regularly seen here include Tawny and Steppe Eagles, and Long-legged and Honey Buzzards; large numbers of wintering harriers roost together collectively at certain locations.

We will return to Jaisalmer in the evening and stay at the Gateway Hotel Rawalkot.

Day 7

Saturday

Jaisalmer

Today enjoy the full day sightseeing tour of the city.

One of the main attractions here is the daunting 12th century Jaisalmer Fort. The beautiful 'havelis' (private residences) which were built by wealthy Jaisalmer merchants are yet another interesting aspect of the desert city. The desert citadel is truly a golden fantasy in the Thar Desert. The Bhatti Rajput ('Bhatti' is a term used for a Rajput caste of warriors and horse riders) ruler Rawal Jaisal, after whom the city is named, founded Jaisalmer in 1156. In Medieval times, the prosperity of the city was due to its location on the main trade route linking India to Egypt, Arabia, Persia, Africa and the West. The Bhatti Rajput rulers accumulated their wealth by imposing taxes on the caravan traders and sometimes illegally by rustling cattle. There are many reminders of Jaisalmer's



colourful history in the city architecture and we will have ample time to see these during our exploration. Wildlife is never far away and even in the heart of the city we will need our binoculars for spotting birds soaring overhead, or to identify wheatears on patches of bare ground.

Day 8

Sunday

Transfer to Rohetgarh

Today we will drive to Rohetgarh where we will stay for two nights at the Rohetgarh Wilderness Camp. This is a comfortable tented camp set on sand dunes in a spectacular landscape. Each tent has teak furniture and elegant

furnishings, as well as an attached private bathroom. The semi-desert environment of Rohetgarh serves as an enchanting backdrop to our journey, as do the colourful turbans of the local people from different ethnic communities.

Day 9

Monday

Rohetgarh

In the morning we will visit Bishnoi village, where we will be hoping to see Blackbuck and later we will visit Khaira Dam for some birding.

Bishnoi is a Hindu sect that worships nature. People of the Bishnoi faith are devoted to wild animals, will not cut trees, and regard conservation as the pivot of human life. Interestingly, they do not choose to live in the lush and relatively easy environment of green valleys, but in the arid desolation of north-west India where nature imposes a considerable struggle on people just to survive, let alone thrive! Though 500 years old, the Bishnoi faith has many lessons for the contemporary world. For over half a millennium, the Bishnois have evolved their lifestyle into a religion that fiercely protects the environment. It is not a religion that has a heritage of myths, miracles, a book, ornate temples or even priests. While Jainism, founded in 1542, also believes in and practices complete non-violence to all living creatures, it is the Bishnoi Community which has been the largest contributing factor to the survival of wildlife in this region.

The Bishnoi, whose settlement we will visit today, are a gentle people following the 29 (bish-noi) principles of a non-violent Vishnaa sect. Founded in the 15th century, the religion dictates protection of all animate beings. Their careful environmental management has resulted in wildlife, including the rare Blackbuck, taking sanctuary near their villages. They are a community of potters, weavers, leather embroiderers and camel herders.

Day 10

Tuesday

Jodhpur

Today we drive to Jodhpur where we will enjoy an afternoon's sightseeing in the city. Jodhpur is the second largest city in Rajasthan and was founded in 1459 by King Rao Jodha. It is a popular tourist destination offering palaces, forts



and temples to investigate and photograph. The old city of Jodhpur is surrounded by a 10-kilometre long wall that was built 100 years after the city was founded. Jodhpur contains many blue-painted houses which can be seen to best advantage from the Mehrangarh Fort, an old Maharajah fort set on a rock above the city. Jodhpur is also called the 'sun city', because the sun shines in almost all seasons. Sightseeing here will include a visit to the Mehrangarh Fort, founded by Rao Jodha in 1459 when he moved his capital here from nearby Mandore. There are several palaces

housed within this imposing structure, among them Moti Mahal, Phool Mahal and Jaswant Thada, the latter constructed out of thin sheets of marble which allow the sun to filter in, and built in memory of Maharajah Jaswant Singh II, in 1899.

Tonight we will be staying at the Ratan Vilas Hotel or similar in Jodhpur. This hotel has a lovely setting; family-run and combines old-world charm with modern comforts and amenities. There is a choice of international food on offer as well as a swimming pool to relax in. Rooms are air-conditioned and en suite.

Day 11

Wednesday

Ranthambore Tiger Reserve

In the early morning we will transfer to Jodhpur railway station to board a train to Ranthambore, a journey of about eight hours. Travelling by train in India is not luxurious, but it is always an unforgettable experience that provides a fascinating insight into ordinary people's daily lives as we pass by villages and rural scenes. Once at Ranthambore, we will be based for three nights at Pugmark, a modern 'jungle lodge' consisting of 20 chalet cottages (each room with private facilities), set in five acres of grounds and with a swimming pool for use on hot afternoons! If time permits this evening, we will take a game drive into the Reserve, once we have settled into our lodge.

Days 12 – 13

Thursday – Friday

Ranthambore Tiger Reserve

Ranthambore is widely considered to be one of India's most beautiful national parks and Tiger reserves. Encircled by a series of high escarpments, the forests, lakes and dry scrub that make up the Reserve are dotted with old forts and temples, creating a wonderful atmosphere for both bird and mammal viewing among a landscape oozing with ancient Rajput history and Rajasthani culture. Ranthambore is perhaps most famous for being one of the original nine 1970s 'Project Tiger' reserves and until recently it was one of the best places in India to see Tigers. However, with recent escalation in poaching right across the subcontinent, there has been a worrying decline in numbers and sightings here. Today, Tiger sightings in the Reserve are far less frequent than a few years ago when encounters could be almost guaranteed but, if anti-poaching measures are successful, it is likely that Ranthambore's Tiger population will quickly increase again.



Tiger viewing by jeep!

Whether or not you see a Tiger on this holiday, you cannot fail to be impressed by the sheer variety and number of other mammals and birds that make the Reserve their home. Common Langurs are abundant, as are both Spotted (Chital) and Sambar Deer, the latter often feeding so far out into the lakes that only their heads show above the water.



Ranthambhore National Park

Nilgai, the largest of India's antelopes, are also fairly common. Sloth Bears and Leopards live here too, though both are very elusive, and we will also be hoping to see Chinkara Antelope (or Indian Gazelle). Marsh Mugger Crocodiles are common in the lakes and monitor lizards are frequently seen around their shores. In addition to the mammals and reptiles, we will see a wonderful diversity of birds. Flocks of Peafowl are on almost constant show, while on the lakes Cotton Pygmy Geese and both Bronze-winged and Pheasant-tailed Jacanas are common. The surrounding woodland and grasslands hold such species as Black-rumped Flameback Woodpecker, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Finch Lark (an Indian endemic), Painted Spurfowl, Jungle Bush Quail, Small Minivet and Stork-billed Kingfisher. There's a possibility of seeing up to five species of owl, including Brown Fish Owl, Dusky Eagle Owl and Collared



Pugmark, Ranthambore

Scops Owl. On our morning and evening game drives we will be accompanied by local guides, whose expert knowledge of the Reserve can be invaluable when tracking down some of the more elusive species.

The spectacular ruins of Ranthambore Fort, whose massive battlements dominate the Reserve are well worth a visit and afford a wonderful vantage point over the rolling hills which comprise the national park as well as the adjacent semi-desert areas where such dry-country birds as Indian Courser, Yellow-wattled Lapwing and sandgrouse species may be found.

Day 14

Saturday

Jaipur

We will have a final visit to Ranthambore Tiger Reserve before driving to Jaipur. We will arrive by late evening and stay at the comfortable Alsisar Haveli or Shahpura House Hotel for two nights. This hotel has well-designed air-conditioned rooms with en suite facilities, as well as a good restaurant offering a choice of Indian and international cuisine, and a lovely swimming pool.

Day 15

Sunday

Jaipur

This morning we will visit the splendid Amber Fort. Later in the afternoon we will enjoy a city sightseeing tour of Jaipur, which is the capital of Rajasthan, and was founded in 1727.

Amber Fort was built by Man Singh (1540 – 1614) who was a trusted general of the emperor Akbar. Amber embodies the Rajput belief that the fort symbolises the strength of the King. The fort's commanding view, sheer walls and rock face, and the curved route that leads to the palaces within, all point to a concern with security and defense. The fort is mirrored in Maota Lake, which stands adjacent to the Dilaram garden. The private apartments begun by Man Singh in the 17th century combine Hindu and Moghul styles and the Sheesh Mahal (Hall of Mirrors), its walls covered with tiny mirrors, becomes a dazzling fantasy with the light of a single match. Other highlights include Jag Mandir (Hall of Victory) which glitters with mirrors, the Jai Mahal and Kali Temple. The ride up to the fort will be on foot.



Day 16

Monday

Jaipur to Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary

We will depart the city of Jaipur to reach Bharatpur for an overnight stay. The afternoon is spent birding at this premier Asian birdwatching spot.

We will stay at The Birder's Inn, situated just outside the Sanctuary. This small privately owned lodge offers 24 spacious rooms that overlook a garden populated with fruit trees that attract various garden birds. You have all the necessary modern comforts like air-conditioning, swimming pool, hot and cold running water, a multi-cuisine restaurant & grill that serves a delectable variety of dishes. Occasionally one might encounter Indian Civet Cat in the evening near the restaurant and there are regular sighting of Fulvous fruit bat on the royal palm trees.

Formerly a shooting preserve of the Rajput Maharajahs of Bharatpur, it occupies just 29 square kilometres, but holds a remarkable diversity of habitats. The wetlands – marshes and flooded ‘jheels’ – are contained within acacia-lined bunds, or embankments, and irrigated by a system of canals and sluices. Around them lie semi-arid grass and scrubland and some excellent broad-leaved Kadum woodland. Over 350 species of birds have been recorded in the Sanctuary and in just this short visit we are likely to see about 50 of them. Among these will be an unequalled array of wetland species, a great variety of vultures, eagles, falcons and owls, plus numerous small land birds. As well as birds, the Sanctuary has an excellent variety of wild animals. Nilgai (blue bull), Sambar and Spotted Deer, Wild Boar, Asiatic Jackal and two species of mongoose are all common, and this is one of the few places in India where the rare Fishing Cat may be seen.

Day 17

Tuesday

Bharatpur – Delhi, via Taj Mahal

After enjoying the early morning at Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary, we will move on to the intriguing deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri, which is an hour's drive from Bharatpur. Fatehpur Sikri was once the capital of the Moghul Empire and is situated roughly halfway between Bharatpur and the city of Agra. Dusky Crag Martins skim over the red sandstone walls of this ancient place and, although the accent is on culture during our visit, birds are always present for members of the group who want to enjoy both the location's historical and natural wonders! Hoopoes, Brown Rock Chats and possibly Blue Rock Thrush may be seen as we walk round, and clouds of Black Kites and vultures circle overhead, the latter likely to include several Long-billed. On occasions, wintering Wallcreepers find the numerous rocky crevices worthy of investigation.

We will now drive to the city of Agra, a short drive from Fatehpur Sikri and visit Taj Mahal to see India's most famous monument. The magnificent atmosphere of the Taj is hard to leave, especially as its gardens and the Yamuna River just behind, offer much ornithological excitement as well! Later we are ready to board our train to Delhi, we will have enjoyed a world-class cultural experience!

Arriving in Delhi by train after three hours, we will be transferred to a 5-star hotel, Holiday Inn or in one of the airport hotels for an overnight stay.



Taj Mahal

Day 18

Wednesday

London

We transfer to Delhi airport to catch a British Airways mid-morning flight to London. We are due to arrive in London by afternoon.

NB. Please note that the itinerary above offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some reordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Corbett Extension

(The minimum number of people required to run this extension is five; however, we may decide to operate it with fewer people, at our discretion, with local guides.)

Day 18 – 20

Wednesday – Friday

Corbett National Park

In the early morning, we will travel by road to our lodge, Tiger Camp, which is located on the periphery of Corbett Tiger Reserve and surrounded by thick jungle on one side and the river Kosi on the other. We will stay there for three nights. Tiger Camp consists of comfortable rooms (not tents) with en suite facilities. It is close to the Reserve and offers good value for money. Tiger Camp is situated in a delightful location near a fast-flowing river where White-capped water Redstart and Plumbeous water Redstarts flit among the boulders and Brown Dippers plunge in and out of the torrent. Wallcreepers not infrequently explore the rocky shoreline here and the Crested Kingfisher is another regular visitor. The surrounding forests are rich in birdlife and, unlike the nearby Tiger Reserve, it is possible to explore these on foot which greatly increases the list of potential bird species we could see. Sensational birding is assured with possibilities including Crested Serpent Eagle, Plum-headed and Slaty-headed Parakeets, Brown Fish-Owl, Blue-bearded Bee-Eater, Great Hornbill, Bronzed Drongo, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler, White-crested Laughing-Thrush, Yellow-bellied Fantail-Flycatcher, Himalayan Rubythroat, Spotted Forktail, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Indian Nuthatch and Oriental White-Eye to name just a few. The passage of a mixed-species



Exploring Corbett Tiger Reserve

bearded Bee-Eater, Great Hornbill, Bronzed Drongo, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler, White-crested Laughing-Thrush, Yellow-bellied Fantail-Flycatcher, Himalayan Rubythroat, Spotted Forktail, Yellow-cheeked Tit, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Indian Nuthatch and Oriental White-Eye to name just a few. The passage of a mixed-species

feeding flock will cause a few minutes of chaos as the bushes appear to rain birds and we are just as likely to encounter such a party in the gardens of the hotel as in the forest. One of the great things about this area is that every outing seems to bring a new selection of birds and surprises occur with each excursion. Even meal times are not safe from interruption as the restaurant windows afford a good view of the gardens and many a meal has been temporarily abandoned when a passing raptor or a new flycatcher attracts attention. Although deemed to be safe for walking, one sometimes speculates whether Tigers will respect the ill-defined boundary of the Tiger Reserve and Leopards certainly wander freely although they are always hard to observe. There is a pleasant walk by the river just two minutes away from the main part of the lodge.

During our stay, possibly on the day of arrival from Delhi, we will spend some time scanning the fast-flowing waters of the River Kosi on the outskirts of the busy market town of Ramnagar. This is a regular wintering site for Ibisbill and we will be hoping to locate one of these unusual Himalayan waders, although they can never be guaranteed and even when present are remarkably difficult to pick out among the similarly coloured stones beside the river.

Having skirted Corbett Tiger Reserve for a day we will enjoy the game drives at the Bijrani range.

From the entrance to the Bijrani range the tracks wind through impressive forests and grasslands. At several places the road crosses over dry river courses which become raging torrents during the summer monsoons making road access impossible. During this period the Reserve riding elephants are employed to fetch food and essential supplies from Ramnagar.

Corbett boasts a large population of Tigers and sightings on this trip have been good over the last few years. Walking inside the Tiger Reserve is strictly prohibited (for obvious reasons!) except in certain designated areas and it is within these that we can safely concentrate our birdwatching efforts.

The ornithological advantages of the location will soon be apparent. The bushes and trees around the compound are alive with birds early in the morning and a walk along the trails can produce a stream of exciting finds including wintering thrushes, Himalayan Rubythroat, Smoky Warbler and a number of flycatcher species. Inspection of the river might reveal Goosander, Black Stork, and the trio of birds associated with Himalayan streams: Plumbeous Redstart, White-capped River-Chat and Crested Kingfisher. Further scans could locate Pallas's Fishing Eagles or Ospreys perched on dead trees in the distance, or bizarre Great Stone Plovers standing morosely on muddy islands. A superb Great Black-headed Gull might glide in to settle on the bank, one of a small wintering flock on a nearby reservoir, and other rarer waders and waterbirds are always possibilities. Forests cloak the surrounding hills and at one or two of the spots where we can get down from the coach to walk round we will have the opportunity to see some of the woodland inhabitants such as hornbills, woodpeckers and barbets. There are also large expanses of open grassland in Corbett, particularly around Bijrani, where Black Francolin fly up from underfoot and a variety of buntings may be identified. Hen Harriers patrol these areas, often in company with other raptors, and at night several species of owl take their toll on the small creatures living there. Add to this mixture a miscellany of babblers, flycatchers, bulbuls, sunbirds and many other wonderful bird species and it is easy to understand why many regard Corbett to be one of the best Indian reserves.

Even the most fanatical of birdwatchers would probably admit that an encounter with a Tiger is pretty special and such a meeting will be a tantalising possibility wherever we go in Corbett. On occasions the daily coach from Ramnagar has been forced to stop because a Tiger was sleeping on the road and every dried up river bed or shady thicket is

worth checking in case one of these magnificent creatures has chosen to rest there. Leopards are seen far less frequently but, like their striped relatives, could appear almost anywhere. Herds of wild elephant inhabit the Reserve and can sometimes be observed from Bijrani browsing at the forest edge but, surprisingly for such large animals, they are adept at disappearing into cover. Spotted Deer and Sambar are favourite Tiger prey and both occur throughout Corbett with large herds of the former congregating in the grasslands around Bijrani. The rarer Hog Deer can also be seen here but the widespread little Muntjac is more often heard barking in the forests than seen. Troupes of Grey Langur Monkeys and Rhesus Macaques are almost as much a part of the northern India landscape as the ubiquitous Palm Squirrels but in Corbett they appear much more wary than their urban counterparts, a caution engendered by the desire to avoid ending up as the evening meal of a big cat! Other mammals might include Wild Boar, Yellow-throated Marten, Jackal and perhaps a family party of otters playing beside one of the streams. Big Mugger Crocodiles are often on view around the shores of the reservoir and the endangered fish-eating Gharial is another Corbett success story, a reintroduction scheme having raised the population to a healthy level. They have no shortage of food as the rivers are teeming with Mahseer, a large salmon-like fish much prized by anglers.

Day 21

Saturday

Delhi

Today we exchange the cool pine-scented air of the Himalayan foothills for the dust of the plains as we return once again to Delhi. The long drive will involve crossing a bridge over the mighty Ganges River and we will make a stop to look at the assemblies of waterbirds that occur in the vicinity of the bridge. Indian Skimmers are often to be found on sandy islands in mid-river, and in remnant patches of reed along the bank we may find such species as White-tailed Stonechat and the stocky Striated Marsh Warbler. Another exciting possibility is the chance of seeing one or two freshwater Ganges River Dolphins from the bridge.

Here we will transfer to a 5-star hotel, Holiday Inn or in one of the airport hotels for an overnight stay before we will have a next day transfer to catch the plane to London.

Day 22

Sunday

London

We transfer to Delhi airport to catch a British Airways mid-morning flight to London. We are due to arrive in London by afternoon.

Grading

Grade A/B (easy to moderate difficulty). During the camel cart safari, those who prefer to walk rather than ride their camel may do so. Otherwise there will be no strenuous walking or activity involved.

Weather

The weather from October to February should be mostly fine and sunny by day with temperatures in the region of 10-30°C but nights can be cold, even frosty, and during early morning game drives it can feel bitterly cold until the sun's heat gathers strength. At Corbett the nights can be very cold and frost is a possibility.

Clothing

Please inspect the separate clothing list, sent to you on booking, thoroughly. Please remember to take a swimming costume, as some of the hotels have a swimming pool.

Diwali Departure

If your trip co-incides with the festival of Diwali, you can't fail to notice the festive atmosphere in the streets. Your guide will explain the sights and sounds, but here is a little background information to explain the festival. There are several beliefs regarding the origin of Diwali (also known as Deepawali) or 'Festival of Lights'. Diwali is a major Hindu festival and it symbolises the victory of good over evil. The Sanskrit word Diwali means 'an array of lights' and stands for victory of brightness over darkness. Diwali is celebrated in the honour of the return of Lord Rama (a revered Hindu deity and King of Ayodhya) with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana to Ayodhya, from a war in which he killed the demon king Ravana. It is believed that the people lit oil lamps along the way to light their path in the darkness and to welcome them home. People express their happiness by lighting earthen 'diyas' (lamps), decorating their houses, bursting firecrackers and inviting family and friends to their households to join them in a sumptuous feast. The lighting of lamps is a way of paying homage to God for the attainment of health, wealth, knowledge, peace, valor and fame.

The Festival falls in 2020 on Saturday 14th November; and will have some impact on the operation of our tour at that time.

Food & accommodation

Accommodation for this tour will be a combination of former Maharajahs' palaces and forest lodges, all with private facilities. All food is included in the price, except for main meals required in Delhi. (Allow £30 in total for this.)

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: main meals in Delhi, and all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs and tips for guides and drivers.

Flights

We use the direct scheduled service of British Airways for most of our tours to India from London Heathrow Terminal 5 because they offer an excellent all-round service (including connecting departures from most of the regional airport, though such departures from regional airports will be subject to an additional charge of around £150) and competitive fares.

If you would prefer to travel World Travellers Plus (normally available at a supplement charge of around £695) or Business (normally available at a supplement charge of around £2,595), please call us for competitive quotes.

These prices are only approximate and could vary according to availability and season. We will be pleased to approach the airline and offer you a quote on request.

If you would prefer to travel from regional airports, please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements and obtain a competitive fare.

Special permit for Desert National Park – Important

In addition to entry visas, we will also require a special permit to visit Desert National Park in Rajasthan. You will need to provide us with the **photocopies of your passport** (clearly showing your photograph, passport number, date of issue, date of expiry and your date of birth); immediately after you have booked the holiday.

We will apply for the permit before you reach Jaisalmer. However, it will be given to you personally after going the Magistrate's office, which we will do on Day 5.

Tour leaders

Durgesh Singh, Yusuf Rizvi, Kaustubh Muluy, Anand Sinha, Aditya Panda, Yashwant Bhinai, Indrajit Latey, Himanshu Rathore, Pradeep Singh, Harish Sharma, Dilip Saini or Rachit Singh.

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How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

Please provide us with a copy of your passport details (clearly showing your passport number, date of issue, date of expiry and your date of birth) at the time of booking. It is important to note that game safaris will be booked using the same passport details that you provide us at the time of booking, and it will not be possible to change these details once they have been booked. (If you renew your passport after booking, please also bring the old passport whose details you gave us at the time of booking as this will also be required).