

Asia's Big Cats

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2/3	Leh
Day 4/7	Snow Leopard Trails Lodge, Ulley
Day 8	Leh
Day 9	Delhi
Day 10/13	Kanha Tiger Reserve
Day 14	Delhi
Day 15	Fly to Colombo; transfer Yala
Day 16	Full day at Yala National Park
Day 17	Full day at Lunugamvehera National Park
Day 18	Transfer to Colombo; Fly London
Day 19	Arrive London

Post-tour Blue Whales extension

Day 18/20	Koggala
Day 21	Transfer to Colombo; Fly London
Day 22	Arrive London



From top: Snow Leopard, Tiger and Leopards

Dates & Costs

2020

Saturday 14th March – Wednesday 1st April £5,595

Blue Whales extension: to Saturday 4th April £695

2021

Thursday 4th March – Monday 22nd March £5,795

Blue Whales extension: to Thursday 25th March £695

Single room supplement

£895 (Extension: £195)

Grading

A. This is a wildlife tour, which involves little walking.

Only in Ulley: B/C. Walks will cover uneven snowy ground at altitudes of up to 4000 metres.

Focus

Snow Leopards, Tigers, Leopards, Blue Whales plus local culture.

£500 reduction if booked without flights, land only trip (Delhi/Colombo).



Snow Leopard

Introduction

Operations Manager, Rajan Jolly, outlines the highlights of our new 19-day holiday in search of Snow Leopards, Tigers and Leopards plus an optional extension to see Blue Whales.

Think of big cats, and you probably think of Africa. However, Asia actually supports twice as many species, including such icons as Snow Leopard, Tiger and Leopard. Our new 'Asia's Big Cats' tour is a thrilling adventure in search of these three felines, travelling from the high and dramatic peaks of the Himalayas, through the verdant jungles of Central India and into the dense coastal forests of Sri Lanka.

Our tour will begin in Delhi, from where we will fly to Leh, capital of the mountainous Ladakh region and, at 3,524 metres, one of highest cities in the world. We will spend a couple of days here acclimatising to the altitude, and experiencing some local culture and wildlife. Next, we will drive to the Ulley Valley, which supports a high density of Snow Leopards; here we will explore the region both by vehicle and on foot. With the help of experienced local spotters, we will hope to find the "grey ghost of the mountains", along with other species like Blue Sheep (Bharal), Siberian Ibex, Wolf, Woolly Hare, Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Himalayan Snowcock, Chukar Partridge and various species of pika and accentor. We will spend our days scanning various valleys for wildlife, while enjoying the comfort of a centrally heated mountain guesthouse. During our stay, we will have an excellent chance of experiencing a memorable Snow Leopard sighting.

From icy Ladakh we will then return to Delhi, before transferring on towards our next destination: Kanha National Park. Kanha is one of India's finest Tiger reserves, with around 100 individuals thriving in its open meadows and extensive Sal forests. Accompanied by expert guides, our morning and afternoon drives will focus on tracking the striped cats, and we should enjoy several Tiger encounters during our four-night stay. What's more, Kanha offers some of the best general mammal viewing in Asia, and we will also hope to find Leopard, Dhole (Indian Wild Dog), Sloth Bear, Jungle Cat, Gaur ('Indian Bison'), Barasingha, Sambar, Chital (Spotted Deer), Wild Boar, Barking Deer, Golden Jackal and a rich variety of bird life.

For the final part of our expedition we must again return to Delhi, for a flight to Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. From there we will move on to Yala National Park, the country's premier wildlife reserve. Yala protects one of the planet's highest densities of Leopard, and over two full days we will explore every inch of the national park in search of them. Tigers never made it here from India, and the Sri Lankan Leopard is therefore the apex predator. Consequently, this subspecies has become the largest in the world, and with no competition they are less strictly nocturnal than elsewhere, making sightings more predictable. In fact, seeing five or more Leopards in a single day is not unheard of. The Leopards' abundant prey includes Wild Boar, Spotted Deer, Sambar, Toque Macaque, Tufted Grey Langur and Bengal Monitor lizard; Water Buffalo, Sloth Bear and Asian Elephant are other prominent members of the local fauna.

We are also offering an optional post-tour extension to view the largest animal ever to live on Earth: the Blue Whale. Sri Lanka's Blue Whales are actually smaller than those elsewhere, but they can still reach 24 metres in length and weigh 150 tons. Mirissa, west of Yala along Sri Lanka's south coast, has recently proved itself to be a highly reliable place to see the giants; we can expect sightings of Blue Whales on both boat trips we take during our three-night stay. Many other cetaceans frequent these waters, including Sperm, Bryde's and Killer Whales, as well as Spinner, Bottlenose, Risso's and Striped Dolphins. Green Turtles, flying fish and tuna could also make an appearance.

Day 1

In Flight

We depart from London on Emirates scheduled flight to Delhi, via Dubai at 09.10am.

Day 2

Fly Delhi to Leh

We will arrive Delhi at around 2.40am and connect with your flight to Leh in Ladakh, scheduled to arrive 8.40am. This is a spectacular flight, if the weather is clear, taking us over the Himalayan range to Leh, leaving the hot and humid monsoon plains for the arid rocky mountains of trans-Himalayan Ladakh.

Leh is situated at 3,500 metres. Acclimatisation is essential in order for you to enjoy your holiday to the full, and we will take things easy at first, spending two full days near to Leh in order to adjust to the altitude. For this reason, we will spend the rest of today relaxing in our hotel, which will either be the Mahey Retreat or similar. The hotel has spectacular Himalayan views, pleasant grounds and a central location. The rooms are basic but comfortable (heated by generator for some hours each day) with en suite facilities.

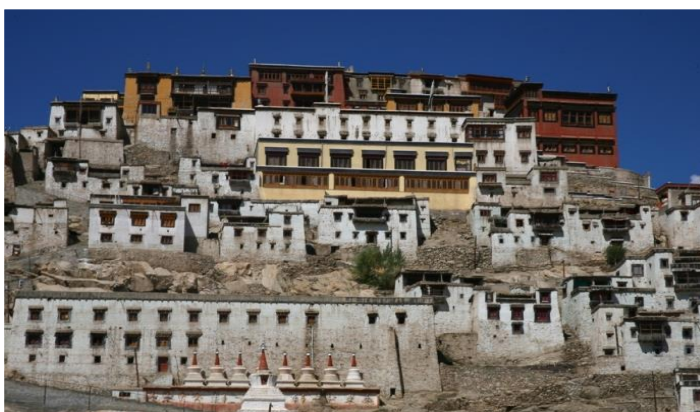
We will spend most of the day to relax and acclimatising to the altitude. In the evening we will enjoy the documentary film or a slide show on Snow Leopard.

Day 3

Sightseeing in Leh; cultural visits to Shey & Thiksey

We will spend a whole day acclimatising to the altitude and exploring the area. Today we will visit Shey, which was once the residence of the royal family. The monastery here is famous for its high gilded statue of Buddha.

Twelve miles from Leh, and spectacularly situated, is one of the finest examples of Ladakhi architecture – Thiksey. This is one of the largest and most impressive Gompas in the area and has several temples containing images, stupas and exquisite wall paintings. Thiksey monastery has an outstanding collection of art in its chambers. The Gompa is incredibly atmospheric, with hypnotic chanting and music to be heard in the background, and there are wonderful views of the valleys from the roof.



Thiksey monastery

If time permits we will also visit Shanti Stupa and Hemis Gompa, one of the richest, largest and most famous Ladakhi Gompas, built during the 1630s.

Day 4 – 7

Snow Leopard Trails Lodge, Ulley

Having fully acclimatised to the altitude, we will then set off on our dedicated 4-day search for Snow Leopards in Ulley Valley, west of Leh. We will stay in a basic mountain guesthouse where hot water is provided in buckets for washing each morning and evening as most pipes are frozen at this time of year. Heating is switched off at night when hot water bottles are provided to ensure a cosy night's sleep. This setting, and the friendly hospitality that goes with it, provides a comfortable alternative to camping in this remote area as we go in search of one of the world's rarest and most stunning large cats.

The village lies at the centre of three interlocking valleys that support a population of about 10 Snow Leopards. These three valleys can be accessed by road, enabling us to explore the region by vehicle, but we will also search on foot. The effort should be worth it, for with the sharp eyes and expertise of our local guides on which to rely, there is an excellent chance of a memorable Snow Leopard sighting – whether at a kill or making its solitary way up a remote mountain pass, blending into the wilderness in which it is totally at home. We will also be on the lookout for Blue Sheep, the main prey species of the Snow Leopard, plus Asiatic Ibex, Ladakh Urial and cute Large-eared and Royle's Pikas. As for the birdlife, few species spend the winter here, but those that do – the Lammergeiers, Himalayan Griffons, Himalayan Snowcock, redstarts, finches and accentors – make splendid mountain companions!

Day 8

Alchi monastery – Leh

Hopefully, after seeing a Snow Leopard, one of the rarest and most beautiful animals on the planet we will travel by road back to Leh visiting Alchi monastery en route. Alchi Monastery is a group of ancient Buddhist shrines that together form one of the most important religious centres in Ladakh.

We will arrive Leh and stay a night at Mahey Retreat.

Day 9

Fly Leh to Delhi

Today we will say goodbye to our team and catch a morning internal flight to Delhi, arriving there mid-morning. We will transfer to our hotel located close to the airport. Our stay in Delhi for this holiday is usually at the 5-star hotel, The Pullman 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). 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. Our stay in this comfortable hotel is well deserved after staying in the mountains! If we do not stay at the Pullman Hotel, a hotel offering an equivalent standard of rooms and service will be used. The rest of the day will be free for us to explore the city on our own.

Day 10

Fly Delhi to Raipur/Nagpur

Early in the morning we drive to the airport and board a domestic flight to Raipur/Nagpur, the closest airports to Kanha (National Park and) Tiger Reserve. A further transfer by road will take us to our accommodation, which will either be at Singinawa Jungle Lodge or Chitvan Jungle Lodge. These lodges will provide a charming base for our 4-night stay, combining luxury with a sense of being close to the countryside.

In the afternoon we will take our first safari game drive (time permitting) into the wonderful wild habitat of the Reserve. With luck we might even have had our first encounter with Tigers before darkness falls. If not, we'll have more opportunities to see them during our daily early morning and afternoon visits.



Asiatic Jackal

Day 11 – 13

Kanha National Park & Tiger Reserve

Kanha Tiger Reserve encompasses 751 square miles of varied habitats, and is one of the largest reserves in India. It is a beautiful region, situated on a plateau in the Maikal Range, and is made up of a crescent of hills (rising to nearly 1,000 metres) that embraces broad undulating grasslands speckled with clumps of bamboo and Sal forest.



Indian Wild Dogs (Dhole)

Mixed deciduous forest cloaks the hills and borders the meadows. Small pools and a perennial lake provide drinking holes for the animals year-round. The reserve is famous for its Swamp Deer – it contains the only population of the hard-ground race in existence – for whose protection Kanha National Park was first established in 1955. Once, these deer roamed India in herds of many thousands. Today there are just 300 left, though this represents a good recovery since 1970 when just 70 individuals remained. However, since the launch of the initially successful Project Tiger in the early '70s, Kanha has been one of the Project's key Tiger Reserves and, because its wide meadows

are so suited to successful Tiger-viewing, it has become one of the best places in the world in which to search for Tigers. Besides Tigers, we can also hope to see plenty of Sambar, Muntjac, Spotted and Swamp Deer, Rhesus Monkeys and Common Langurs. We should also see Gaur (Asiatic Bison), Wild Boar, Asiatic Jackal, and with luck, Leopard and Dhole (Indian Wild Dog). Sloth Bear and two of India's lowland antelopes – Chousingha and the beautiful Blackbuck – also occur in the park, though a sighting typically requires patience and good fortune.



Hoopoe

We have a good chance of seeing up to 120 species of birds during our stay. There's a good variety of birds of prey in the park including Black-shouldered Kite, Crested Serpent & Crested Hawk Eagles, White-eyed Buzzard, Shikra, and a variety of vultures. Open country birds such as Painted Francolin, Indian Roller, Yellow- and Red-wattled Lapwings, and a variety of woodpeckers, pigeons, larks, pipits, and drongos are common. In the forests, the elusive Malabar Pied Hornbill, Black-hooded Oriole, and a selection of flycatchers, babblers and warblers may be found.

In particular, we'll keep a look out for the very rare Green Munia.

Our daily programme will include both a morning and an evening jeep drive inside the reserve. These are, of course, all optional – and there may be times when you'd prefer to relax back at the lodge and recharge your batteries – though it goes without saying that the more you do, the more you'll see! You are likely to see Tigers as well as the bulk of the other wildlife you will encounter during the holiday on these game drives.

We will typically aim to leave our lodge each morning at about 5.45am, taking a picnic breakfast with us. We will stay in the reserve until 11am, when it closes during the hottest part of the day. We will return to the reserve when it re-opens at 4pm and stay there until dusk, at about 6.30pm. (NB. From 1st November to 15th February the reserve opens in the afternoon at 3pm and our stay will last until dusk at about 5.30pm). In the middle of the day, after lunch, there will be time to rest or go on short birdwatching walks around the lodge.



Tiger

Outside the reserve we will be able to enjoy the area's birdlife on foot (walking is forbidden in all the Tiger Reserves of India, for obvious reasons!).



On most of our Asia's Big Cats tours our accommodation for the four nights at Kanha will be at either Singinawa Jungle Lodge or Chitvan Jungle Lodge, both of which are comfortable lodges offering twin-bedded stone cottages set amongst flower-filled gardens. All cottages have private facilities.

Day 14

Fly Raipur/Nagpur to Delhi

We take our last game drive in Kanha Tiger Reserve in the early morning and hope to end our stay with some special sightings! Later in the afternoon, we must reluctantly leave Kanha behind, taking a long drive south to Nagpur or Raipur airport (a journey of approximately 5 hours). We will say our goodbyes to our tour leader before taking the flight to Delhi at 7.40pm. On reaching Delhi at 9.35pm, we will spend our last night in India at a hotel close to the airport, such as the 5-star hotel, The Pullman Aerocity for convenient access to the Delhi airport.

Day 15

Sunday

Fly to Colombo (Sri Lanka) – Yala National Park

We depart Delhi at 5.10am on a direct Sri Lankan Airlines scheduled flight. We arrive in Colombo at 8.50am and will be met at the airport by a Sri Lankan naturalist who will escort us throughout the tour in Sri Lanka. Later, as we head south towards Yala National Park, a light meal stop will no doubt be welcome after the long flight and will give us an opportunity to become acquainted with some characteristic Sri Lankan birds such as Common Myna, Koel and Purple Sunbird.

The drive from Colombo airport will probably take six to seven hours. We should finally reach Yala in late afternoon and check-in at the splendid Cinnamon Wild Hotel where we lodge for three nights. After settling in to our rooms, a period of welcome relaxation will give us a chance to sample the resort's facilities or perhaps simply sit on the sandy beach watching the waves breaking on the sand with binoculars ready in case a huge White-bellied Sea Eagle glides along overhead or terns begin fishing offshore. Sri Lanka is a remarkably lush, verdant tropical island and trees surrounding the hotel will offer further birdwatching opportunities which might perhaps be taken advantage of from the comfort of a lounge beside the swimming pool! Typical species of such forest edge include Magpie Robin, Yellow-billed Babbler, three species of sunbird and Koel. The local bird list is sure to grow with each day spent at Yala.

Day 16

Yala National Park

We will drive for around ten minutes to the Yala National Park with our packed breakfast and lunch for a full day safari. Please note a very early start will be necessary to enter this very popular and busy park in jeeps for a full day of bird and mammal watching. Yala is among the oldest and best known National Park in Sri Lanka and unlike many African parks with open plains, Yala has a diverse ecosystems ranging from moist monsoon forest, to dry monsoon forests, semi deciduous forests, thorn forests, grasslands, fresh water & marine wetlands, and sandy beaches, which possesses a large number of important plant species and smaller animals. Early morning is the best time to come across a Sloth Bear or Leopard but



Leopard, Yala

it is also the time of peak bird activity and there will be much to see in this wonderful reserve. A network of tracks criss-cross the accessible areas of the National Park embracing open country, where herds of Spotted Deer and wild buffalo, secluded lakes and coastal mudflats. It is not permitted to drive out of tracks or walk inside the park except at designated areas but despite this restriction we should see many birds during the morning. Peacocks are common and in the first few hours after dawn Sri Lanka Junglefowl emerge from cover to display and call. Raptors include Changeable Hawk-Eagle, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, and Grey-headed Fish-Eagle.



Asian Elephants
appearances but tales of obliging animals are frequent.

Whether it is particular individuals becoming accustomed to human visitors, or a consequence of recent droughts, there is no doubt that diurnal sightings of Leopards in Yala have become much more common in recent years and we will hope that luck is on our side as we tour the Park. Sometimes the cats may be observed padding along the road, or disappearing into cover but the best views are obtained when one is discovered in a tree and such individuals may spend hours dozing on a convenient branch to the delight of the tourists.

Black-necked and Adjutant Storks are among the many waterbirds inhabiting the reserve (albeit both very rare) along with Spot-billed Pelicans, Painted Storks, Openbill Storks and Purple Herons. Waders include the odd looking Great Thick-Knee, Black-winged Stilts, Yellow-wattled Lapwing and sandplovers. Not all the residents are associated with water and in the drier areas we will be looking for Blue-tailed and Little Green Bee-eaters, Hoopoe, Blue-faced Malkoha, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike, Baya Weaver, White-throated Silver-Bill and Brahminy Myna. In places we emerge onto the coast and overlook magnificent stretches of deserted beach straight from the pages of a holiday brochure. One or two small fishing communities exist inside the park and where the catches are brought ashore we may find flocks of Brown-headed Gulls and a scan of offshore rocks could reveal both Great Crested and Lesser Crested Terns.



Cinnamon Wild Yala

Wild Boar are generally much more conspicuous than their predators and both Ruddy and Grey Mongooses occur, the former distinguished by a black tail tip. The larger Stripe-necked or 'Badger' Mongoose is also a Yala resident. Elephants are widespread inside Yala but surprisingly elusive and hard to see amid woodland. If we are lucky we may chance upon a family group bathing in one of the pools. To complete a dazzling array of creatures, Land and Water Monitors are numerous and large Mugger Crocodiles inhabit the bigger pools. As with all such excursions,

luck will play a big part in what we see during our time in Yala but no visit is ever dull and we are certain to encounter an impressive variety of species.

Leopards will be high priority but we will also be seeking any of the inhabitants not seen during the morning visit. Another mammal not already mentioned is the powerful Wild Buffalo. Herds of these impressive beasts inhabit Yala and probably originate from wild stock although escapee feral Water Buffalo over the years make it difficult to be certain about the genetic purity of the wild population. These somewhat bellicose creatures are treated with due respect by their neighbours but when one dies through accident or natural causes, the carcass provides a rich feast for the crocodiles and other scavengers!

Day 17

Lunugamvehera National Park

In the morning we will drive for over an hour to the impressive Lunugamvehera National Park with our packed breakfast and lunch for a full day safari. This National Park was declared in 1995 with the intention of protecting



Sloth Bear

the catchment area of the Lunugamvehera reservoir. Ghostly white dead trees decorate the reservoir and its rotting remains make perfect watch towers for nesting White-bellied Sea Eagles. The recent spike in Leopard populations in this park has made it a sought out alternative to Yala National Park. Mosaic of scrubland and grassland make up the forest which is home to Sloth Bear, Muntjac, Mouse Deer, Stripe-necked Mongoose and an array of birds including the rare Racket-

tailed Drongo and common water birds such as the Grey Heron, Black-headed Ibis, Asian Openbill, Painted Stork and Spot-billed Pelican

Day 18

Yala National Park – Colombo

In the morning, we must reluctantly leave Yala behind, taking a long drive north to a hotel close to Colombo airport for a farewell meal. We will say our goodbyes to our tour leader before taking the flight to London, via Dubai 10.05pm.

Day 19

London

We are due to arrive in London by early morning at around 7.10am.

Blue Whales extension

Cost: £695

Single room supplement: £195

(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.)

Introduction

The Great Whales are a source of wonder and fascination to land-based humans as we struggle to comprehend their alien, unfettered existence roaming the mysterious depths of the world's oceans. There is a seemingly insatiable desire to savour the experience of being close to these magnificent creatures and wherever feeding or breeding imperatives bring numbers of whales to congregate in a particular area there will invariably be local boatmen taking visitors to enjoy a few precious moments sharing the ocean with these leviathans. The largest of all the cetaceans, indeed the largest of all mammals, the Blue Whale, has always been something of an enigma, a true ocean wanderer living a pelagic lifestyle which rarely brings them with any predictability close to land. Gradually, however, scientists are beginning to gain some understanding of the enormous migrations undertaken by Blue Whales and one discovery has been their regular appearances close to the south coast of Sri Lanka between November and early April. It is this annual event that we will be taking advantage of during this extension in a country that has long been a Naturetrek favourite.

Day 18

Koggala

Today we leave the group and travel by road to our delightful accommodation, the Koggala Beach Hotel. Areas of Sri Lanka's south-western coastline were devastated by the 2004 tsunami. However, the Sri Lankans are resilient people and much reconstruction has taken place since the tragedy. Fortunately, the Koggala Beach Hotel was only partially affected and this resort hotel will be our base for all three nights of our extension tour. The drive from Yala will probably take 3 to 4 hours and, after settling into our rooms, a period of relaxation will no doubt be welcome. There will be time to sample the resort's amenities or simply sit on the sandy beach watching the waves breaking on the sand with binoculars at the ready in case a huge White-bellied Sea Eagle should appear overhead



Blue Whale Spinner Dolphins

or terns begin fishing offshore. Sri Lanka is a remarkably lush, verdant tropical island and trees surrounding the will hotel offer further birdwatching opportunities (even from the comfort of a lounge beside the swimming pool!). Typical forest edge species such as Magpie Robin, Yellow-billed Babbler, three species of sunbird, Koel, Coppersmith Barbet and Flameback Woodpecker are among the birds seen here. The local bird list is sure to grow with each day spent at Mirissa.

Day 19

Mirissa

Thirty minutes' drive from the hotel is the small fishing port of Mirissa and it is here that we board a whale-watching vessel for a 4-hour morning excursion in search of Blue Whales. The distance sailed will very much depend on whale sightings and sea conditions but we may go up to 10 kilometers offshore (although it is more likely that most observations will be much closer to land). The seas off Sri Lanka are rich in marine-life but it is only comparatively recently that scientists have discovered the regular appearances of Blue Whales between November and early April. Up to a dozen or more of these enigmatic ocean wanderers may be present off the coast and we will rely on our skipper's expertise to locate as many individuals as possible during each excursion. Despite their huge bulk, Blue Whales have a very small dorsal fin and are not always easy to find on the surface; however, they do have an extremely tall columnar blow, and it is this 9-metre high plume of condensed water vapour that usually betrays the presence of a whale. Blue Whales also tend to display their huge curved tail flukes before each dive and this



The Beach at Mirissa

again is an indicator of where to look. The captain will take the boat as close as he can without causing disturbance to the whales and we will hope that by drifting with the current we can allow the creatures to approach alongside the vessel, hopefully near enough to be able to smell their distinctive pungent breath! We may have to content ourselves with longer distance views on this first outing but there will be more chances for close-up encounters on the following days. Whilst Blue Whales will be our principle quarry, many other cetacea occur in these waters and species observed during the recent seasons include Bryde's, Sperm and Short-finned Pilot Whales, Bottlenosed Dolphins, Rissos's Dolphins and Spinner Dolphins, the latter sometimes in pods numbering several hundred

animals. Birdlife is less plentiful at this time of year but possibilities include Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, Pomarine Skua, Crested, Bridled and White-winged Terns.

The sailing will last about 3 to 4 hours and, on our return to land, we will retire for a leisurely lunch before enjoying the birding around the resort. There are no boat rides in the afternoon as outings are less productive and the sea can be rough (please that note boat rides are weather dependent and can be cancelled without prior notice). At the end of our boat trip, as we return to the Koggala Beach Hotel, we will hope to be celebrating some memorable encounters with the largest creature on earth.



Fishing boats with Galle Fort behind

On one of the afternoons in Mirissa we will enjoy an excursion to Galle, which was a thriving port long before colonial times; situated in the south-west of the country, it attracted Arabs, Persians, Romans and Greeks on their way across the Indian Ocean. In 1505, the Portuguese attacked and settled in the town, 135 years later conceding it to the Dutch, who built the famous fort at Galle. In 1796 the British took over and used the fort as their headquarters. Today, Galle Fort is the old part of the city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the best preserved colonial sea fortress in Asia. It is a cosy little town in its own right with narrow streets, churches, cloistered courtyards and shuttered mansions standing testament to their colonial past. Galle Fort has recently received a lot of investment from expatriates living in South-east Asia and is now bustling with boutique hotels, art galleries, tiny shops, cafes and restaurants. There are several museums to visit, as well as the Dutch Reformed Church and the lively Arab Quarter. The entrances to Galle National Maritime Museum and Fort are not included and can be paid locally. (At the time of writing there is no entrance fee required for Galle Fort, and it costs about £4 to visit the Galle National Maritime Museum.

Day 20

Mirissa

This morning we will repeat the whale-watching excursion from Mirissa and, with the ever-changing ocean, we will hope for further Blue Whale sightings as well as appearances by other whales, dolphins and birds. In characteristic fashion, the dolphins often swim in the bow-wave of the vessel offering spectacular views as they do so. The huge pods of Spinner Dolphins are not a predictable phenomenon but if we are fortunate enough to witness one of these it is as well to have your cameras at the ready, as the seas become a turmoil of activity and scores, or even hundreds, of dolphins progress across the ocean in a loose assembly, leaping out of the water at great speed as they pursue their prey. Sea conditions in March and early April are usually calm allowing the best chances for observations and making whale 'spouts' visible over a long distance. Seas may, however, be a little rougher in November and December.



Blue Whale and remoras



Koggala Beach Hotel, Koggala



After lunch at the hotel we will spend the cooler end of the afternoon birdwatching. A wide range of species is possible including Red-wattled Lapwing and White-breasted Waterhen, Purple Swamphen, terns and waterbirds as well as more forest inhabitants. Alternatively, you may choose to relax or swim off the beach. Later in the day we can look for Indian Flying Foxes as the night settles and maybe witness enormous Indian Flying Foxes flapping off from their roost site to begin some nocturnal foraging. These huge, fruit-eating bats are widespread on the island (though declining in numbers) and colonies are always a welcome sight on our tours.

Day 21

Colombo

Our plans for today are left deliberately flexible and will depend on what we have managed to see during the previous few days. If necessary, a further whale-watching trip could be taken at extra cost but, hopefully, we will have achieved our marine objectives and can conclude our tour. Eventually we can postpone the moment no longer and will set off on the southern highway for a 3-hour drive north to a hotel close to Colombo airport for a farewell meal. We will say our goodbyes to our tour leader before taking the flight to London, via Dubai 10.05pm.

Day 22

London

We are due to arrive in London by early morning at around 7.10am.

Other extensions

If our scheduled post-tour Blue Whales extension isn't for you, we would be delighted to tailor a different holiday extension suited to your particular objectives and needs. You may wish to sample some of the cultural delights of Sri Lanka for example, or visit a different national park. In Sri Lanka, anything is possible; just call our India consultant, Rajan Jolly on 01962 73301 for expert advice.

Weather

It will be very cold in Ladakh. You are visiting one of the world's highest and most remote mountain ranges, where conditions are unpredictable – snow may fall at any time. For much of the winter the sun does shine in this region, to the north of the Himalayas, and at altitudes between 3,700 and 4,500 metres, we will expect sunny weather with a chill wind. Temperatures could drop as low as -30°C at night but are more typically between -8°C and -25°C . Heavy snow can of course fall at any time at this season. Conditions underfoot may be very difficult – icy, snowy and steep.



Lammergeiers

In Kahha: The temperatures in the national parks of central and northern India vary greatly according to the time and of day and season. In March, the morning will be cold and the afternoons are mainly hot and sun hats, sun cream, cotton clothes and shorts all are required.

In Sri Lanka, generally hot and sunny with temperatures in the low country ranging from 25°C to 35°C with high humidity, particularly in the Wet Zone. Temperatures decrease in the hills to a range of 15°C to 25°C around Nuwara Eliya. Rain can occur at any time but is not usually prolonged outside the monsoon seasons (showers are an almost daily occurrence at Sinharaja).

Food & accommodation

The cost of all meals and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

Inclusions / Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- International and domestic flights in economy class.
- Full board accommodation throughout (i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner). On the main tour, on the post-tour Blue Whales extension, we use comfortable tourist lodges with private facilities (as described in the text above).
- All transport and guiding.
- All wildlife excursions, park fees and reserve entry fees.

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Online visa (India and Sri Lanka).
- Drinks (though most lodges in the national parks provide boiled drinking water or a bottle of water with their compliments).
- Discretionary tipping (leaders and drivers). During the course of your holiday you will receive periodic assistance from a wide variety of enthusiastic, friendly and helpful local guides, jeep drivers, trackers, hotel

porters, waiters and other local people. The tipping of these individuals will be handled by your tour leader(s) and its cost is included within the price of your holiday.

- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, laundry, in-transit expenses, meals on internal flights, camera fees. In Ulley, Kanha and Sri Lanka camera fees is included.

National Park remain closed to public access on Wednesday afternoons

The National Parks Authority for Madhya Pradesh has announced that all National Parks in the State will remain closed to public access on Wednesday afternoons until further notice. This order will affect Pench, Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Satpura and Panna Reserves. The inconvenience caused to Naturetrek tour participants is regretted but unfortunately there is nothing we can do to facilitate entry during these closures. On occasions when our tour itinerary would normally include entry to one of these reserves on a Wednesday afternoons we will arrange alternative natural history activities either around the periphery of the National Parks or in nearby wildlife habitats.

Clothing

You will need to be very well equipped for this holiday. Essential equipment: A down jacket, woolly hat/balaclava, skiing type gloves, waterproof jacket and warm outdoor-wear trousers, fleece (and many other warm layers), thermal underwear – more than one set recommended, sturdy 4-season good-quality walking boots. You will be cold if you do not bring these items. A full list of essential and recommended clothing will be provided with your Pre-departure information.

Safety & Security

You have chosen to travel to India. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/india> regularly prior to travel.

Flights

We use scheduled Emirates flights for this tour to India and Sri Lanka. Please note that there are no direct flights to Leh from UK and we fly via Dubai and Delhi.

If you would prefer to travel in Business class, the supplement charge is **from £2,995**. If you would prefer to travel from regional airports (Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Gatwick may be possible and will be subject to an additional charge of **£195**), please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements.

Tour leaders

In India: Durgesh Singh, Yusuf Rizvi or Anand Sinha.

In Sri Lanka: Saman Kumara, Indika Jayatissa, Dinal Samarasinghe or Mukesh Hirdaramani

Grading and focus

This tour is graded A. In Ulley it is graded as B/C. Walks will cover uneven snowy ground at altitudes of up to 4000 metres.

Most of the birdwatching walks are gentle and suitable for any age and level of fitness. You will need to appreciate that mammals in Kanha, Lunugamvehera and Yala National Parks and elsewhere are largely shy and retiring, present in low densities and often crepuscular or nocturnal in nature. Although this tour spends time and effort in looking for exciting and iconic mammal species such as Tiger, Leopard and a range of cetaceans, participants should be aware that mammals will be on view for only a small percentage of our time in the field. Time between mammal encounters will largely be spent birdwatching (alert to mammals at all times of course), as birds are the most conspicuous members of the local fauna.

Some of the species we'll be looking for and enjoying are mentioned throughout the text above. Our chances of seeing Blue Whale on the extension are very good. In the last two years we have operated many groups to see Blue Whale, just one group has failed to see the Blue Whales. Other cetaceans, including Spinner Dolphins and Bottlenose Dolphins are more regular. Tigers are regularly seen in Kanha. Leopards in Yala are difficult to see, although our clients and tour leaders have taken some fantastic photographs over the years. In the same two-year period, we've had a 90% success rate with Leopards.

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 note that our Snow Leopard departures tend to book up a long time in advance. Please book as early as possible to avoid disappointment.

Please provide us with your passport details (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).



Early Booking on Tiger Tours is essential!

The new regulations, including a drastic reduction in the number of jeeps and visitors permitted to enter such popular reserves as Bandhavgarh, Kanha and Pench each day, meant that those booking late could often not be accommodated. The simple fact is that the number of beds available at the lodges servicing each of these parks

now far exceeds the tiny number of visitors permitted to enter each day. We cannot therefore emphasise strongly enough that early booking is essential. You really do need to book now if you are to secure a place on a tour that visits one of these Tiger Reserves next season.



Tigers



Tiger