

On the Trail of the Siberian Tiger

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

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| Day 1 | Depart London. |
| Day 2 | Khabarovsk. |
| Day 3/7 | Durminskoye Forest Reserve. |
| Day 8 | Khabarovsk. |
| Day 9 | Return flight to London. |

Departs

February.

Dates and prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code RUS03) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

Focus

Mammals and other wildlife.

Grading

Grade B – it will be very cold, and it will be snowy and icy underfoot on walks.

Highlights

- Five nights in the heart of the rarely-visited Russian taiga forests
- Days spent searching the reserve for signs of Siberian Tiger, accompanied by expert biologists
- Capturing our own camera trap images of wildlife, including Tigers
- Chance of seeing a wild Siberian Tiger!
- Other mammals in the area include Siberian Weasel, Sable and Wild Boar
- Birds such as White-tailed Eagle, Azure-winged Magpie, Hazel Grouse and Ural Owl
- Our visit will directly contribute to Tiger conservation



Images from the top: Siberian Tiger (A Batalov), Durminskoye Camp (B Chapple), Siberian Tiger Track (B Chapple)



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

Picture a wild Tiger, and the verdant jungles of tropical Asia may spring to mind. However, the world's largest cat has another stronghold thousands of miles away, in the vast taiga forests of the Russian Far East. Once perilously close to extinction, more than 500 Tigers now roam these remote woodlands, making up the planet's largest remaining contiguous population. Most of these surviving Siberian (or Amur) Tigers patrol the inaccessible Sikhote-Alin mountain range, spread between Khabarovsk and Primorsky Krai.

In the northern foothills of this rocky formation is the Durminskoye Forest Reserve, run by the well-known conservationist Alexander Batalov. For nearly 30 years he and his dedicated rangers have worked to protect tigers, with the result being that Durminskoye now has a healthy number of the big cats. We will visit Durminskoye at the end of winter, when there is still snow on the ground but temperatures do not drop to the bone-chilling depths they reach in January and early February. The snow cover will be vital to our efforts to track Tigers; with the help of Alexander and his dedicated team we will search for fresh signs of activity, as well as monitoring Tiger movements using camera traps.

The Siberian Tiger is one of the most elusive animals on Earth, and a sighting is far from guaranteed. This is a pioneering trip to an extremely remote and little-visited part of the world, and part of the thrill will come from simply knowing that we are sharing the tiger's habitat. Our visit will also directly contribute to their conservation, as Alexander relies on tourism to fund his work. However, there can be no better place than here to search for 'Amba' – god of the forest – as the indigenous Udege people call the Tiger. Between five and six Tigers are regularly recorded in the vicinity of our base camp, including a dominant male and several breeding females, and even if we are not lucky enough to see them we will certainly find abundant evidence of their presence.

Tigers will naturally dominate our thoughts during the tour, but they are not the only creature that makes its home in the dense birch forest. Prey species include Siberian Roe Deer, Manchurian Wapiti and Wild Boar; other animals we may encounter include Siberian Weasel, Sable, Raccoon Dog, Red Fox, and even Eurasian Lynx (rare)! It must be stressed, however, that viewing even the commoner species is not straightforward in this hilly and thickly wooded landscape. Most birds in the Russian Far East head south for the winter, but we'll have a good chance of finding the hardier residents, such as Hazel Grouse, Azure-winged Magpie, White-tailed Eagle and Black Woodpecker.

It is important to recognise that this could be a challenging tour. Temperatures will be well below freezing, and accommodation is basic (although perfectly warm and comfortable). Wildlife viewing will be difficult, and we will need to be very lucky to see a wild Siberian Tiger! However, it should also be intensely rewarding; very few Western tourists have ever visited these vast forests, and it will be a privilege to learn from people who have spent their lives fighting to save these magnificent mammals. Our visit will help to ensure that their important work can continue!

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering 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.

Day 1

In flight

We depart London's Heathrow airport on an overnight Aeroflot flight to Khabarovsk, via Moscow.

Day 2

Khabarovsk

We will arrive in Khabarovsk, the penultimate stop on the great Trans-Siberian Railway, and transfer to a comfortable tourist hotel in the city centre. Khabarovsk is a surprisingly attractive city on the banks of the mighty Amur River, which will be frozen solid at the time of our visit. Urban wildlife will not be much in evidence, but we may pick up Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Japanese Tit and Large-billed Crow.



Eurasian Tree Sparrow

The afternoon will be at leisure, with an opportunity for those who wish to do so to visit the cultural highlights of Khabarovsk, including the natural history museum and Russian Orthodox cathedral. It will have been a long journey to the Russian Far East, however, and members of the group may prefer to rest. In the evening, we will have dinner either in our hotel or in a local restaurant, where a variety of Western and traditional Russian food will be on offer.

Day 3

Base Camp, Durminskoye Forest Reserve

After a leisurely breakfast (and hopefully a good night's sleep) we will be picked up by four-wheel-drive vehicles for the 200 kilometres journey to Durminskoye Forest Reserve. We will be travelling into an extremely remote area, and the drive can take between three and eight hours to complete, depending on snow conditions.

As our journey progresses, the flat agricultural land around Khabarovsk will give way first to open taiga bogs, and then to rolling hills clothed in dense birch forest. Significant gatherings of White-tailed Eagles can often be seen along our route, along with attendant Northern Ravens. The deeper into the wilderness we go, the more evidence we will find of the forest's hidden wildlife; abundant tracks and trails will start to crisscross the snowy road, preserving the past activity of Siberian Roe and Manchurian Deer, Wild Boar, Sable and others. We'll keep our eyes peeled for the creatures themselves, as well as for smaller mammals such as Eurasian Red Squirrel, which here sport an unfamiliar slate-grey coat!

We will aim to stop for a picnic lunch somewhere, before arriving at Durminskoye sometime in the afternoon. For the last third of our journey we will very much be in tiger country, and our senses will be on high alert as we scan the snowy landscape for a glimpse of striped orange fur.

At base camp we will be greeted by Alexander Batalov, a legendary conservationist who manages the 200 kilometre square Durminskoye Reserve. No-one knows more about Siberian Tigers, or has done more to protect them, than Alexander. We could not wish for a better guide to show us around the winter forests.



Eurasian Red Squirrel

The camp itself is a pretty, picture-postcard collection of snow-covered log cabins, set in a small woodland clearing. Common birds around the camp are sure to remind us of home – Eurasian Nuthatch, Marsh Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker in particular – although slightly more exotic visitors can include Azure-winged Magpie and Siberian Jay. After the welcome party, we will settle into our simple but cosy accommodation, before warming ourselves up with a freshly prepared bowl of soup or broth. If our journey from Khabarovsk hasn't taken too long, we may go out on a short excursion in the evening. Then, after a hearty local dinner, we will retire for our first night in the taiga.

Days 4 - 7

Base Camp, Durminskoye Forest Reserve

For the next four full days we will explore Durminskoye in depth, by snowmobile, on foot and in 4x4 vehicles. We will typically set off into the forest after breakfast, and if the weather is good (i.e. not too cold!) we may spend the whole day in the field, enjoying a packed lunch at a scenic spot. Where we go will depend on recent Tiger activity, and we will be on the lookout for fresh Tiger tracks – great dinner-plate-sized imprints in the snow – as well as the deep gouges in tree bark that Tigers use to mark their territories. We will also check and set camera traps on well-used trails, in the hope of capturing our very own images of the world's largest feline. The Siberian Tiger is one of the world's most elusive animals, and while signs of their presence will be all around us, we will need a considerable amount of good fortune to see the big cat in the flesh.



Tiger scratch marks

One thing it is important to note is that we will be limited in our ability to pursue Tigers actively by following their footprints. Even fresh tracks could be several hours old, by which time these wide-ranging animals could already be several miles away. Off the established trails, the terrain in Durminskoye is challenging, and trekking cross-country for an undetermined time and distance is not a realistic option. Even if we were able to approach Tigers in this fashion, it would be impossible to control the circumstances of an encounter, potentially putting us, and the Tiger, in danger. Where conditions allow, we will be able to follow tracks for a short distance, which will

provide an opportunity for Alexander to impart fascinating insights into the individual's behaviour. Tigers are fond of using the relatively snow-free roads to patrol their territories, and our best chance of a sighting will consequently be from the vehicles.

Alexander and his team have unparalleled knowledge of Siberian Tiger ecology and conservation, and we will be sure to learn a great deal about this remarkable feline. Their passion is infectious, and their stories about life in the forest are thrilling; for example, they once had a Tiger stroll nonchalantly past the kitchen window during dinner! There is plenty of other life here too, including birds such as Hazel Grouse, Black Woodpecker and Ural Owl, although only the hardiest of species are here year-round.

If desired, there will be the opportunity on one of the days to visit a nearby rehabilitation centre, where injured Tigers are looked after before being released back into the wild. We may also wish to visit the Udege, the indigenous people of the area whose animist culture reveres the Tiger as a god.

At the end of the day we will return to camp where, before dinner, we will have the chance to relax in a Russian 'banya' or steam sauna. The typical post-dinner routine will be to check the camera trap memory cards collected that day – images will hopefully include Tigers in the snow, as well as other mammals like Raccoon Dog and Red Fox. If we are very lucky, we may get pictures of something really unusual such as Grey Wolf or Eurasian Lynx. After a long day, our log cabins – kept wonderfully warm by wood-burning stoves – will provide a welcome home for the night.

Day 8

Khabarovsk

We should have time for one more trip into the forest this morning, before we sadly have to depart Durminskoye and return to the bright lights of Khabarovsk. Even if we have not been lucky enough to see a Siberian Tiger with our own eyes, one will almost certainly have seen us, and everyone will hopefully agree that it has been a rare privilege to share the forest with this most iconic of wild animals. In contrast to so many areas across their range, Tigers are thriving in Durminskoye, largely thanks to nearly three decades of dedicated work by Alexander and his team. Alexander relies on tourism to fund his conservation activities, and our visit will have directly supported his efforts to ensure that Siberian Tigers continue to survive in the Russian Far East.



The long drive back to the city will give us one last chance for an encounter. Tigers often use the roads leading into the reserve to patrol their territories, and we may well find that jeep tracks from the previous day are overlaid with fresh pugmarks! Unfortunately, the great birch forests will gradually start to recede, and we should arrive back at our Khabarovsk hotel by late afternoon.

In the evening, we will all go out for an end-of-tour dinner at one of Khabarovsk's finest eateries. Anyone particularly keen to get into the local spirit may wish to mark the occasion with one or two glasses of vodka!

Day 9

London

Today we will catch our flight back to Moscow, and then on to London, arriving at our final destination in the late evening.

Tour grading

Grade B. Easy to moderately strenuous. Please be aware that conditions will be very cold and it will be snowy and icy underfoot. The accommodation is also quite basic. Although we will use 4x4s and snowmobiles for much of our exploration of the reserve, the tour will include plenty of short walks which will be over snowy and icy terrain.

Weather

Siberian winters can be extremely cold, with record temperatures as low as -40°C . However, at the time of our visit in early March we expect temperatures to vary between -15°C and 0°C , which will be manageable with proper winter clothing. It should mostly be clear and sunny, with the possibility of occasional snowfall. In fact, we will hope for fresh snow during our visit, as it makes tracking tigers easier!

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the cost of the holiday, with the exception of dinners in Khabarovsk (Days 2 and 8, allow £50). Accommodation in Khabarovsk will be in a smart modern hotel, and in the forest we will stay in cosy log cabins. Each cabin contains two single beds, and is kept warm with wood-burning stoves. Long-drop toilets are located in separate buildings near the cabins, and washing facilities are available in the form of a Russian 'banya' or steam bath.

Food in the camp will be freshly prepared using ingredients from the surrounding forest. Wild Boar and Manchurian Deer are responsibly hunted to provide meat, and vegetables are grown in the camp garden during the summer. It's all very sustainable and delicious fare. Vegetarians can be catered for.



Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of your holiday: alcoholic drinks, tips to local guides, dinners on Day 2 and Day 8 and all items of a personal nature such as souvenirs, telephone calls etc.

Entry requirements

UK nationals require a visa to enter Russia. These can be arranged through the Russian National Tourist Office (www.visitrussia.org.uk). There is a standard service which takes 20 working days to process, and an express service which takes three working days. A letter of invitation is required, which we are able to provide through our local agents in Russia. You will be required to visit a Visa Application Centre in person to provide biometric data (fingerprints etc.). In the UK, these are located in Manchester, Edinburgh and London. We will be able to provide assistance throughout the visa application process.

Your safety & security

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 – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/russia or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.