

India - International Animal Rescue

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

2008 - 2010

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2	Delhi
Day 3	Early morning train to Agra; sightseeing in Agra
Day 4	Full day visit to Agra Bear Sanctuary
Day 5	Transfer to Bharatpur; en route visit Fatehpur Sikri
Day 6	Bharatpur; full day Birdwatching
Day 7	Train to Ranthambore
Day 8	Ranthambore Tiger Reserve
Day 9	Train to Delhi
Day 10	Return London



Image courtesy of Mrs South

Dates

2008

Friday 14th November – Sunday 23rd November 2008

2009

Friday 13th February – Sunday 22nd February 2009

Friday 13th November – Sunday 22nd November 2009

2010

Friday 12th February – Sunday 21st February 2010

Friday 12th November – Sunday 21st November 2010

Cost

£1,695 (London/London) £1,295 (Delhi/Delhi)

Insurance

£65

Single room supplement

£295



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Introduction

Naturetrek has teamed up with conservation organisation International Animal Rescue (IAR) to offer this unique 10-day tour to India. We will visit the Bear Sanctuary near Agra, funded by IAR, an organisation which campaigns against the 'dancing' Sloth Bears and provides financial support to re-train the bear handlers in order to stamp out this cruel practice. We will then visit Agra's most famous monument, the Taj Mahal, before moving on to two more of India's top wildlife-viewing destinations – Ranthambore (National Park and) Tiger Reserve, and Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary. This tour offers a unique combination of conservation, culture and wildlife, as well as a chance to make a direct contribution to the welfare of bears.

This tour offers the first ever opportunity to visit these rescued dancing bears. Since the early days of IAR's campaign against this practice in India, the organisation has considered promoting the Agra Sanctuary as an opportunity for well-managed and responsible ecotourism. The facility is not a zoo – it has been created as a haven in which the rescued bears can recover and live safely in an environment that is as close to their wild habitat as possible.

A trip to Agra would not be complete without visiting the spectacular Taj Mahal, a monument that is synonymous with romance, and a testament to the splendour and opulence of the Moghul dynasties. We will visit the splendid Agra Fort as well as the spectacular, perfectly preserved ruins of the former Moghul capital, Fatehpur Sikri, before moving on to our next venue, Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary. India's most outstanding bird sanctuary, Bharatpur offers world-class birdwatching and hosts many migrant species of waterbirds from Siberia and Northern Asia, as well as a wide range of other wildlife. Large Rock Pythons can be seen sunning themselves at Python Point and a variety of mammals also inhabits the Sanctuary, including Sambar, otters and the rare Fishing Cat. During the monsoon season large numbers of storks and herons nest in the marshes, their numbers augmenting the thousands of winter visitors.

Our next stop is the beautiful Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve. Although it is located in a remote area of rural Rajasthan, Ranthambore can be reached with relative ease by train from Bharatpur, passing en route through a constantly changing landscape, dotted with occasional villages where the traditional way of life still prevails. Recent Naturetrek groups visiting the Reserve have enjoyed outstanding Tiger and wildlife sightings, though the constant threat of poaching means that there is never any guarantee of sighting of this rare and elusive mammal.

10% of the income from this tour will be spent directly on IAR's 'Free the Bears' campaign. IAR is the sole UK funder of two sanctuaries for rescued bears, one in north India and one near Bangalore, in the south.

Day 1

Friday

In Flight

We depart London in the early afternoon on a scheduled Emirates flight to Delhi, via Dubai (duty-free shopping at Dubai airport is among the best and cheapest in the world). We will be in flight overnight.

If you would prefer a direct flight from London to Delhi we will gladly arrange this for you (availability permitting). Please note that this is likely to involve extra cost. Call Rajan on 01962 733051 for details.

Day 2

Saturday

Delhi

We will arrive in Delhi early this morning. During the middle part of the day you will be free to relax and recover after your flight, or visit one of the famous sights of Old Delhi such as the Red Fort or the Jami Masjid (Great Mosque), or go to one of the capital's excellent museums. If you are keen to start birdwatching there will be a chance to visit one of the city's attractive wooded parks and do some birding along the Yamuna River. Typical birds of the city include Black Kite, Laughing and Spotted Doves, Ring-necked Parakeet, Little Swifts, Little Green Bee-eater, Black Drongo, and a variety of Shrikes, Mynas, Bulbuls and Babblers. The pretty little Five-striped Palm Squirrel may be seen everywhere, while Grey Hornbills and Green Barbets are two of the more unusual bird species to look out for.

We will stay at the City Park Hotel in Delhi for one night. This is a comfortable 4-star hotel which offers en suite rooms, a wide choice of cuisine and a swimming pool.

Day 3

Sunday

Train to Agra

Today we will board an early morning train to Agra. On arriving in Agra, we will first check in at the Taj View – a comfortable city-centre hotel with views of the Taj Mahal and air-conditioned en suite rooms. If this hotel is not available we will stay at another hotel of similar standard. We will then set out to visit the famous Taj Mahal and other great buildings of this fascinating Moghul city. The magnificent atmosphere of the Taj is hard to leave, especially as its gardens and the Yamuna River just behind offer so much ornithological interest as well. Agra is full of cultural delights, so in the afternoon we will continue our sightseeing with a visit to the Itmad-ud-daulah ('Baby Taj'), the mausoleum of Mirza Ghiyas Beg, the grandfather of Mumtaz Mahal, 'lady of the Taj'. This monument is quite as magnificent as the Taj Mahal itself and set in idyllic riverside gardens. Agra Fort is a marvellous structure too, with towering walls 2½-kilometres in length.

Day 4

Monday

Agra Bear Sanctuary

The Agra Bear Sanctuary is located in Sur Sarovar, 27 kilometres from Agra on the Agra-Mathura Road, near the town of Keetam. Surrounded by a secure perimeter wall to keep the bears safe, it is a haven for rescued dancing Sloth Bears. Here they can roam and forage safely in acres of jungle habitat, climbing trees and cooling off in freshwater pools. When the heat becomes too much they can rest in the shade of their dens.

The bears in the Sanctuary have been surrendered by their handlers – members of the Kalandar tribe who have traditionally used them to beg money from tourists on the streets. The bears used for this purpose would typically have been poached from the wild when they were only a few weeks old then endured lives of misery and pain until rescue.

Dancing bears have been on the streets of India for many years. As tourism grew, the pitiful spectacle of these wonderful animals being made to 'dance' was seen right across the country. In 1972 the practice was finally outlawed by Parliament, but at that time there was no facility to house and care for the bears, and the established

zoos would not accept them. It was 30 years before a purpose-built sanctuary for these animals was established on land donated by the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department, inside the Sur Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, Agra. The facility is managed by the Indian charity, Wildlife SOS. Just a few days before Christmas in December 2002 the Sanctuary welcomed its first six rescued bears.

To date nearly 200 bears have been rescued. At first they are kept in quarantine in a large acclimatisation pen which allows them to get used to their new surroundings. A detailed picture is built up of the health of each bear before they are released into the extensive forest of the Sanctuary. Here they also enjoy all kinds of environmental enrichment to stimulate them and prevent boredom, including hollow logs packed with honey and 'wobble trees' to shake that are laden with delicious fruits.

It is estimated that there are still about 1,000 dancing bears on the streets of India and it is IAR's aim to provide a safe-haven for each of them. Visitors to India can support the charity's work by refusing to watch or give money to the bear handlers, or indeed to anyone using captive wild animals to beg from passers-by.

Days 5 – 6

Tuesday – Wednesday

Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary

This morning we will drive to Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary. On arrival, we will be based for two nights in the Laxmi Villas Palace Hotel, situated just outside the Sanctuary. This small ex-palace is comfortable, friendly, and has a magnificent swimming pool and abundant character. All rooms have private facilities, but this is not one of those palaces that has been modernised to offer 5-star facilities. Instead, its decor, old photographs and other furnishings reflect the past history of Bharatpur and provide the hotel with an old-fashioned charm.

En route we will visit the fascinating 'ghost 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 history during our visit, birds are always present for those who wish to combine history with nature! Hoopoes, Brown Rock Chats and possibly a Blue Rock Thrush might be seen as we walk round, and clouds of Black Kites and vultures circle overhead – the latter likely to include several Long-billed. On occasion, wintering Wallcreepers find the numerous rocky crevices worthy of investigation.

Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary, also known as Keoladeo Ghana National Park, is arguably Asia's top birding destination and is one of the finest birdwatching locations in the world. The Sanctuary provides a diversity and abundance of birdlife equalled only by Africa and you cannot fail to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of birds present. This is one of the best times of the year to visit Bharatpur, and we will see an outstanding range of waterbirds and raptors, as well as some mammals. The flooded 'jheels' with their shady, tree-lined bunds provide the perfect site for birdwatcher and photographer alike. Notable species among the throngs of nesting Painted Storks, White Ibises, Darters and Spoonbills are specialities such as the threatened Black-necked Stork, Comb Duck, and the elusive Spotted Creeper.

Thousands of ducks crowd the marshes and pools. Among more familiar species, we will also be looking for hundreds of Ferruginous and Lesser Whistling Ducks, plus smaller numbers of Red-crested Pochards and Spot-billed Ducks. Both White and Dalmatian Pelicans visit the Sanctuary, as do large numbers of Common Cranes,

along with smaller numbers of Sarus Cranes in the winter. We could even be lucky enough to see the seriously endangered Siberian White Crane, four of which returned to Bharatpur in the winter of 1995/1996 after an absence of three years. At least two birds have returned in subsequent winters but they remain on the verge of extinction and we would need to be fortunate indeed to see this magnificent species.

Bharatpur also provides unrivalled opportunities for observing a large range of raptors, including Spotted, Imperial, Steppe and Tawny Eagles, as well as a host of vultures. As the day heats up, columns of raptors rise in spirals on the thermals, a single flock of eagles often numbering 20-plus birds of four or five different species. The tree-lined edges to the jheels also provide suitable habitat for a range of wintering and resident passerines. Both Blyth's Reed and Clamorous Reed Warblers are numerous, as are Bluethroats, Yellow-browed Warblers and Asian Magpie Robins. Careful searching should also turn up Siberian Rubythroat and other more elusive species, such as Orange-headed Ground Thrush, Dusky Warbler, Marshall's Iora and Large-tailed Nightjar. Other interesting wildlife we could see includes the rare and beautiful Blackbuck, Indian Smooth Otter, Fishing Cat, Soft-shelled Turtle and Indian Python. Nilgai, Sambar, Spotted Deer and Rhesus Macaques are also common.

We will spend most of our time in Bharatpur exploring the many track-ways that criss-cross the park, accompanied by our guide. Most of the birdwatching will be done on foot but we will also make full use of the local rickshaw drivers who provide an indispensable service ferrying birdwatchers and locals alike from the entrance into the heart of the wetland.

Day 7

Thursday

Train to Ranthambore Tiger Reserve

Following a final morning's activities in and around Bharatpur, we will leave mid-morning to catch a train to Ranthambore, a journey of about four hours. There we will be based for our 2-night stay at Ranthambore Forest Lodge. This is a modern jungle lodge consisting of 25 chalet cottages (each room with private facilities) set in five acres of grounds, with a swimming pool for use on hot afternoons.

Day 8

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 dripping with ancient Rajput history and Rajasthani culture. Ranthambore is perhaps most famous for being one of the original nine Project Tiger reserves established in 1973 and, until recently, it provided one of the best opportunities anywhere in India of seeing a Tiger. However, with an escalation in poaching right across the subcontinent, there has been a decline in both numbers and sightings of this magnificent animal. Today, Tiger sightings in the park are 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.

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. Nilgai, the largest of India's antelopes, are also fairly common. For the very fortunate there is also a chance of an encounter with a Sloth Bear, a Leopard or perhaps a Chinkara Antelope (or Indian Gazelle). Marsh Muggers Crocodiles are common in the lakes and Monitor Lizards are frequently seen around their shores. In addition to the mammals and reptiles, we will also 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. In addition, there is a chance to find up to five species of owl, including Brown Fish Owl, Dusky Eagle Owl and Collared Scops Owl. On our morning and evening game drives we will be accompanied by local guides whose expert knowledge of the Reserve is invaluable for 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 provide a wonderful vantage point over the rolling hills which comprise the Reserve, 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 9

Saturday

Delhi

After a final early morning game drive we will leave Ranthambore for our return rail journey to Delhi (a journey of about six hours). Here we will transfer to the Ashok Country Resort, or hotel of similar standard, and we will make use of its facilities, which include a pool and attractive gardens, before a late-night transfer to catch the plane to London.

Day 10

Sunday

London

We depart Delhi in the early hours of the morning on a scheduled Emirates flight to London, arriving home just after midday.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below 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.

Grading

A (easy). This is a safari-style cultural and wildlife-watching tour involving only non-strenuous walking.

Weather

In November the temperature in north and central India ranges from 5-6°C in the early morning to 15-20°C during the day, dropping to 4-5°C again at night. It is cold in the mornings – jacket, hat, gloves, fleece and several layers will all be needed during this season. The weather in February should be mostly fine and sunny by day, with temperatures in the region of 15-25°C, but the nights can be very cold, with frost a possibility, and during early morning game drives it can feel bitterly cold until the sun gathers heat. It will be hot in the afternoons in February – sun hats, sun cream, cotton clothes and shorts will all be needed. Rain is possible at any time of year.

Clothing

Please inspect the separate clothing list, which will be sent to you on booking, thoroughly.

Food & Accommodation

All accommodation and meals at Ranthambore and Bharatpur are included in our price.

Extra Expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: any meals required in Delhi and Agra (the range of restaurants here is exceptional and well worth taking advantage of). You will need to bring extra money – about £30 in total – for these. Items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs and tips for guides and drivers are not included in the price.

Flights

We use scheduled Emirates flights for this tour to India. Emirates offers an excellent all-round service, including departures from Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. Please note that departures from regional airports may be subject to an additional charge. If you would prefer to travel from one of these regional airports please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements and obtain a competitive fare. The sole disadvantage of Emirates' flights to India is a 3½-hour transit time in Dubai on the outbound flight, and a 2-hour transit time on the return flight (these transit times are less if you are travelling from Heathrow).

If you would prefer a direct flight you can opt to travel with British Airways, Air India, Virgin Atlantic or Jet Airways. We will gladly arrange a direct flight for you, but please give us plenty of warning. Expect to pay approximately an extra £200 and £250 for direct flights. If you decide to fly direct an extra night might need to be added at the beginning of the tour due to difference in timings. Expect to pay an extra £95 to £125 for a night's city accommodation. These prices are only approximate and may vary according to availability and season. We will be pleased to approach the respective airline for you and offer a quote on request.

If you would prefer to travel Business Class or First Class, please call us for competitive quotes.

Checklist & Previous Tour Reports

Where available, these are automatically provided on booking, and we will gladly send them to you before this if you want a more detailed preview.

Entry Requirements

All UK passport holders and most other nationalities require a visa for India, which is obtainable in advance from your nearest embassy. No vaccinations are mandatory for entry, but as recommended in our brochure we think it is wise to also be protected against TB, polio, typhoid, tetanus and hepatitis A and to take malaria prophylactics. Above all, it is essential to consult your GP about your requirements as soon as possible before travelling.

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How to Book Your Place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure and complete and return the enclosed booking form, together with a deposit of 10% of the holiday cost plus the full cost of the insurance premium if required. 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. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us now on 01962 733051. Alternatively, you are welcome to book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk or by calling on 01962 733051. If you would like us to call you, please send us an e-mail on info@naturetrek.co.uk or rajan@naturetrek.co.uk and we will call you right back. Please note that as all our Bargain Selection tours are carefully costed on maximum group sizes to maximise value for money, it may be necessary to impose a small group surcharge of up to 10% (£155) on groups falling short of 10.

Glowing Reports of Naturetrek Tour [from IAR]

The first IAR/Naturetrek wildlife tour to the Agra Bear Sanctuary in February was a resounding success. Everyone on the tour had a wonderful time and returned with glowing accounts of their experiences.

The first ever organised visit to the Agra Bear Sanctuary by a wildlife tour company took place in February 2007 with UK wildlife travel company, Naturetrek. IAR received glowing reports back from those who took part. As well as visiting the Agra Bear Sanctuary, funded by IAR, they visited Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary and Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, home to some of India's majestic Tigers.

Naturetrek provides Britain's largest selection of professionally organised natural history holidays. This year, for the first time, they created a bespoke tour to include a day with the rescued dancing bears at Agra Bear Sanctuary. Naturetrek holidays are renowned for their educational value and this trip was no exception. Kartick Satyanarayan and Vasudha Mehta of Wildlife SOS gave their visitors a unique look behind the scenes at the Sanctuary to learn about the specialist care that turns a distressed dancing bear into a happy and boisterous bundle of fur, full of energy and mischief. The group gained a special insight into the plight of the Sloth Bear in India and this project, which provides a solution for both animals and people.

The visit to the Sanctuary was undoubtedly a highlight of the holiday and a very emotional experience. Teacher Doris Spence, who took school teddy bear Flip with her on the tour, said: 'Our trip to see the bears was such a wonderful experience. Kartick and Vasudha were so helpful and obviously devoted to the task of saving the bears from their terrible life of trauma and pain. The work that IAR is doing out in India must be such an incentive to them all.

'Flip, my bear from school, really enjoyed himself, and he said meeting the young rescued cubs was the best thing to have happened on his adventures throughout the world!'

IAR supporter Daphne Birch was concerned to see that there was a shortage of space for rearing the cubs at the Sanctuary. On finding that it would be possible to build a special cub weaning unit if sufficient funds were available, she pledged to cover the cost. On returning to the UK, Daphne fulfilled her promise by sending a generous donation for the construction and fitting out of the new unit. Everyone involved in the project is extremely grateful to Daphne for her generous support.

The next Naturetrek tour takes place in November and several bookings have already been taken. Anyone interested in going on the tour should contact Naturetrek on 01962 733051 or email info@naturetrek.co.uk.

Naturetrek generously donates 10% of the income from the tours to IAR's 'Free the Bears' campaign.