



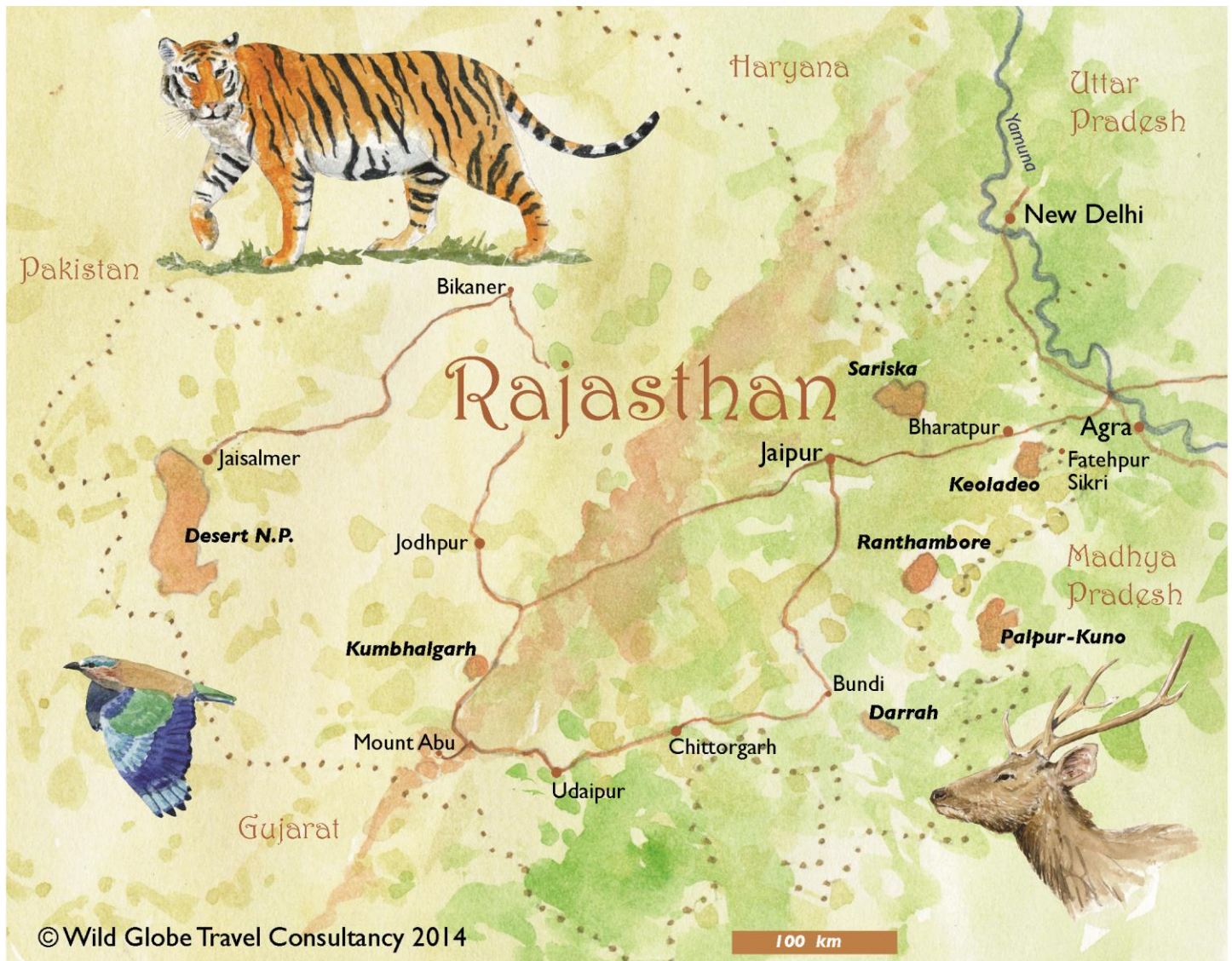
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The Jewels of Rajasthan - 45 Days

Major Destinations

Delhi - Agra - National Chambal Sanctuary - Fatehpur Sikri - Bharatpur - Keoladeo Ghana National Park - Sariska National Park - Jaipur - Ranthambhore National Park - Bundi - Jhalawar - Darrah Wildlife Sanctuary - Sorsan Wildlife Sanctuary - Chittorgarh - Udaipur - Ranakpur - Kumbhalgarh Fort and Wildlife Sanctuary - Mount Abu - Bera - Jodhpur - Jaisalmer - Desert National Park - Gajner - Bikaner

Tour Highlights and Activities

This is the ultimate tour of the 'land of kings', an intoxicating region steeped in former glories and timeless traditions, where a turbulent past meets a vibrant present and the hospitality of the people is matched only by the magnificence of the vast, almost inconceivable forts and the delicate beauty of the exquisite palaces and temples housed within them. We begin with a short tour of Mahya Pradesh, before we immerse ourselves in the evocative sights, sounds and colours of Rajasthan, where camels and horses are still highly prized and a rich enduring culture is flamboyantly expressed in the music, dance, and songs of a thousand different festivals and fairs. The wildlife is just as diverse as the culture and we can reasonably expect to observe both tiger and leopard, two of the most beautiful cats on the planet, as well as sloth bear, wolf, wild dog and hyena. Our accommodation will often rival the palaces that we are visiting and has been personally selected in some of the finest settings in the region, from intimate forest lodges and picturesque lakes to sprawling deserts and isolated hilltops. Our exhilarating activities will include balloon flights, paragliding, abseiling, boat cruises and horse, elephant and camel rides and we will swim in extravagant marble pools built for maharajas, whose grandiose footsteps we will gladly shadow across this golden, historic region.



Day 1 - Delhi

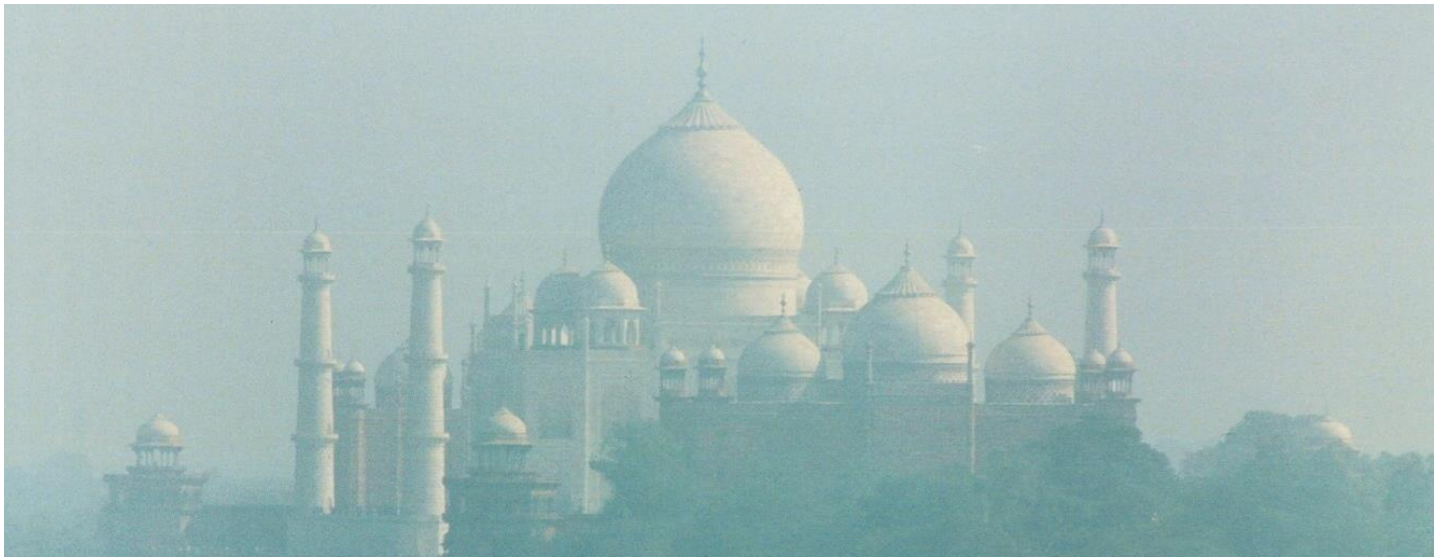
Arrive in the capital Delhi and meet the local guide who will be with us for the entire duration of the trip. After a short transfer to our hotel, the rest of the day is free to discover this vibrant and welcoming city. A great starting point is a rickshaw ride through the bustling narrow lanes and lively bazaars of Old Delhi to the famous Red Fort, which always looks particularly attractive in the bright afternoon sunlight.

Days 2 to 3 - Delhi

A captivating blend of influences, cultures and religions, over the next two days we will visit some of the highlights of both Old and New Delhi, taking time to explore the substantial grounds and red sandstone buildings of the Red Fort, the world's tallest minaret and 1600 year-old iron pillar at Qutub Minar and the fascinating collection of astronomical instruments at the Jantar Mantar observatory. Our excursions will also include India Gate, a memorial to the 90,000 Indian soldiers who died fighting for the British Raj in the First World War, the waterways and fountains of the Mughal Gardens and the Akshardham Temple, the largest Hindu temple in the World and certainly one of the most impressive buildings in this rich, historical city. Other places of interest will include the highly distinctive shopping centres of Chandi Chowk and Connaught Place, the tomb and intricate water courses of the Mughal Emperor Humayun and the beautiful 'Lotus Temple', a place of worship for all religions and one of the more recent architectural wonders of a city built in a dazzling array of styles over more than a thousand years.

Day 4 - Delhi to Agra

We leave Delhi this morning for the short journey south to Agra and one of the most visited landmarks on the planet, the celebrated Taj Mahal, a mausoleum built by the fifth Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan on the bank of the Yamuna River in memory of his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal. A marvel of both craftsmanship and symmetry, construction on the superlative main marble tomb began in 1632 and took 20,000 workers twelve years to complete. The imperceptibly leaning minarets, ornate mosque and monumental entrance gate were added over the next ten years. We will spend the early afternoon experiencing the perfect architectural harmony on display here and marvelling at the exquisite decorative art, particularly the elaborate lattices, sculpted from single blocks of marble, the superbly carved flower and plant reliefs and the intricately inlaid flowers, created by dozens of individual precious and semi-precious stones set in marble. Our final visit of the day will be to the neighbouring Agra Fort, a commanding walled citadel with an uninterrupted and memorable view of the Taj Mahal. The monuments of this red sandstone fortification are almost as unforgettable and we will have plenty of time to admire the grand palaces, towers and gateways before we stop at the highest rampart to marvel at the deep orange glow of the sun slowly slipping away behind this timeless city.



Day 5 - Agra to Chambal

We leave our hotel before dawn today to watch the first rays of the morning sun illuminate the brilliant white marble of the Taj Mahal and after a late breakfast we detour south to the National Chambal Sanctuary, a conservation initiative protecting a 400km stretch of the Chambal River and large swathes of the ravines on both riverbanks. This is an exciting wildlife experience, as the Chambal supports one of the last remaining populations of the Ganges subspecies of the south Asian river dolphin and this afternoon we will take a boat safari with a qualified naturalist to search for these intelligent but endangered creatures. The waterways of the sanctuary are also home to eight turtle species, smooth coated otter, monitor lizard and sizeable populations of gharial and mugger crocodile. In the evening the enthusiastic staff at our sanctuary lodge will help us search for common palm civet, Indian flying fox, jungle cat and Indian hedgehog.

Days 6 to 7 - Chambal

We will have further boat safaris each morning, as the dolphins are generally easier to locate in the early morning, and, depending on whether we have seen the dolphins, the rest of our time is free to enjoy the other activities on offer at our lodge, including a jeep safari through the Chambal and Yamuna ravines. These ravines, which form part of the sanctuary, support an unexpectedly large number of species, including wolf, striped hyena, jungle cat, golden jackal, Indian fox, blackbuck and nilgai. Guided walks, cultural visits and horse and camel safaris are among the other optional activities and in the evenings we will have the opportunity to spotlight in and around the grounds of our lodge.



Day 8 - Chambal to Keoladeo Ghana National Park

After breakfast we drive back north past Agra to the walled city of Fatehpur Sikri, the former capital of the Mughal Empire for a short period until Emperor Akbar the Great moved his court firstly to Lahore and then to Agra. Perfectly preserved and built in a distinctive blend of Islamic, Hindu and Jain architecture, the red sandstone palaces and audience halls of Fatehpur Sikri are fine examples of the grandeur and religious tolerance of the Mughals. The five-tiered open pavilion of Panch Mahal and the public and private audience halls of Diwan-i-Aam and Diwan-i-Khas are all highlights of this sophisticated city and other notable structures include the Tomb of Sheikh Salim Chishti, overlaid in pristine white marble, the Jami Masjid mosque and the Anup Talao platform, set amid a pool and reached by four symmetrical bridges. After almost a full week in India we will then transfer north and finally enter Rajasthan, where we will enjoy the first of many mouth watering meals in a region known for the quality of both its food and its hospitality. Following a delightful lunch we will move on to Bharatpur and the celebrated Keoladeo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site which has been attracting birdwatchers from all over the planet for several decades. Vehicles are not allowed in the park, but bicycles and cycle-rickshaws can be hired and the best way to view the wildlife is on foot with a knowledgeable guide. When the water levels

permit it is also possible to take a pleasant boat ride to view the colonies of nesting birds, but water shortages have been a problem at Keoladeo in recent years, primarily as a result of pressure from local communities and farmers and highly unpredictable monsoon rains. Whilst the staggering variety of birds are the main attraction here for the majority of visitors, including a host of migratory waterfowl, almost 30 mammal species have been observed in the park and, in addition to the various deer, this afternoon we have a chance to see wild boar, small Indian mongoose, Indian grey mongoose, jungle cat, leopard cat, common palm civet, small Indian civet, smooth Indian otter, golden jackal, striped hyena, porcupine, Indian fox, Indian hare and nilgai antelope. Keoladeo is also one of the few places in the country where it is possible, probable would be stretching things somewhat, to find the extremely rare fishing cat and rock python are easier to see here than anywhere else, as sightings are almost guaranteed if you spend a couple of days looking in the right areas. Monitor lizard are another common reptile species and until 2005, when she died of natural causes, a wandering tigress chose to make Keoladeo her own private sanctuary.

Day 9 - Keoladeo Ghana National Park

Today we can either spend a full day in the park with a packed lunch or we can split the day in two and return to our lodge to relax and swim during the midday heat. There is also the option of visiting the arresting fortifications, palaces and gardens of nearby Deeg, the original capital of the area before Bharatpur.

Day 10 - Keoladeo Ghana National Park to Sariska National Park

We leave Keoladeo this morning to travel west to Sariska National Park and our rather special home for the next three nights, a luxurious former royal palace hotel. As with so many protected areas across the globe, Sariska has suffered at the hands of poachers in recent years and the tigers that live here now have all been reintroduced and are being carefully monitored away from the main tourist circuits. We are therefore unlikely to see tigers during our stay, although they are still occasionally spotted, but Sariska is a good reserve for other animals and our presence will also support the essential conservation efforts that are being made here. After lunch and a relaxing stroll through the lush green vegetation of the sprawling hotel gardens, and maybe a swim in the enticing crystal clear water of the massive pool, we will take our first game drive this afternoon in our open-sided safari vehicle. As the majority of tourists exploring Rajasthan generally visit neighbouring Ranthambhore, we will have the pleasure of discovering Sariska on near empty roads and our encounters here are likely to be relatively undisturbed.

Days 11 to 12 - Sariska National Park

We will ensure that we enter the park at first light on both days, as the thick dhok forests and lovely waterholes are particularly pleasing in the early morning mist and this is the best time to look for leopard and the even more elusive caracal, which thrive here but



are rarely seen. The waterholes are good areas to find the many deer and antelope species, including sambar, chital, nilgai and chousingha, and Sariska is also notable for the large number of peafowl, which can often be photographed displaying the extravagant fan of their dazzling tail feathers. Wild boar, golden jackal, jungle cat, Indian porcupine, Indian hedgehog and striped hyena all occur and there are large populations of southern plains grey langur and rhesus macaque. Although originally believed to be confined to southern India and Sri Lanka, the incredibly rare rusty spotted cat has also been recorded at Sariska, as well as in Udaipur and as far north as Jammu and Kashmir. The area has a number of interesting temples and ruins that can be visited during our spare time and, this being Rajasthan, camel and horse rides are also widely available. In

the evening sumptuous feasts are prepared in the lavish grounds of our palace hotel, against a backdrop of blazing fires and intoxicating Rajasthani music and dance.

Day 13 - Sariska National Park to Jaipur

We have the opportunity for another game drive this morning before we make the short transfer to Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan and part of the famous Golden Triangle, a popular tourist circuit between Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. After checking into an equally opulent royal palace hotel, we will drive just north of Jaipur to visit the Amer Fort, commonly known as the Amber Fort and one of the very finest examples of the magnificent Rajput style of architecture. We will make our journey up to the fort on elephant back and will spend the afternoon exploring the handsome courtyards, ornate mirrored ceilings and walls, and exquisitely carved frescos and columns. The superbly decorated three-storey entrance gate Ganesh Pol is a particular highlight in a complex full of them and the heavily latticed screens provide a different perspective of the intricately designed gardens built within Maota Lake. We will return to Jaipur by way of Jaigarh Fort, a heavily fortified stronghold built to protect Amer and connected to it by an underground tunnel. On the way back we will also stop at Jal Mahal or the 'Water Palace', before heading to a restaurant in the old city centre to enjoy a traditional Rajasthani meal. Constructed in Man Sagar Lake, Jal Mahal is beautifully lit in the evening and looks especially inspiring when the lake's water level is high during the monsoon.



Day 14 - Jaipur.

Known as the Pink City because of the welcoming pink wash the buildings were dressed with to commemorate the royal visit of Prince Albert in 1876, Jaipur is an exuberant, colourful capital and after breakfast we will begin our tour at Hawa Mahal or the Palace of the Winds, which forms part of the east wall of the City Palace and was designed in the shape of the crown of the Hindu god Krishna. Built for ladies of the Maharaja's harem, this five-storey red and pink sandstone palace was designed in such a way that it was possible for the concubines to view the street life of Jaipur without being observed. After admiring this unique design and all 953 latticed windows bathed in the golden glow of the early morning sunlight, we will move inside the city walls to the main complex, a series of magnificently constructed palaces, courtyards, pavilions and temples. Some of many highlights include Chandra Mahal, the earliest building in the palace and still the residence of the current Maharaja of Jaipur, Mubarak Mahal, a perfectly constructed two-storey guesthouse which now displays traditional costumes from all over India, the superb Armoury Museum and the two huge silver urns that Maharaja Madho Singh II had constructed for his visit to England in 1901 for the coronation of Edward VII. Each urn was filled with water from the Ganges to enable the Maharaja to avoid drinking the English water. Of the many other treasures on display here, the Ridhi Sidhi Pol gates, which depict the four seasons in detailed, breathtaking beauty, are perhaps the most fitting tribute to the incredibly skilled artisans who crafted them with such care. Given that the first buildings here were conceived and constructed during the rule of Maharaja Jai Singh II, it is probably not surprising that another of his five Jantar Mantar observatories can also be found in the palace grounds and we have the option of studying more of his ingeniously designed instruments before returning to the city for lunch and a leisurely stroll through the lively bazaars. During the afternoon we will visit Albert Hall or Central Museum in the Ram Niwas Gardens, the colony of entertaining rhesus macaque monkeys at Galtaji Temple and Nahargarh Fort in the Aravalli Hills, for the best possible view of the city, Man Sagar Lake and Jal Mahal Palace.



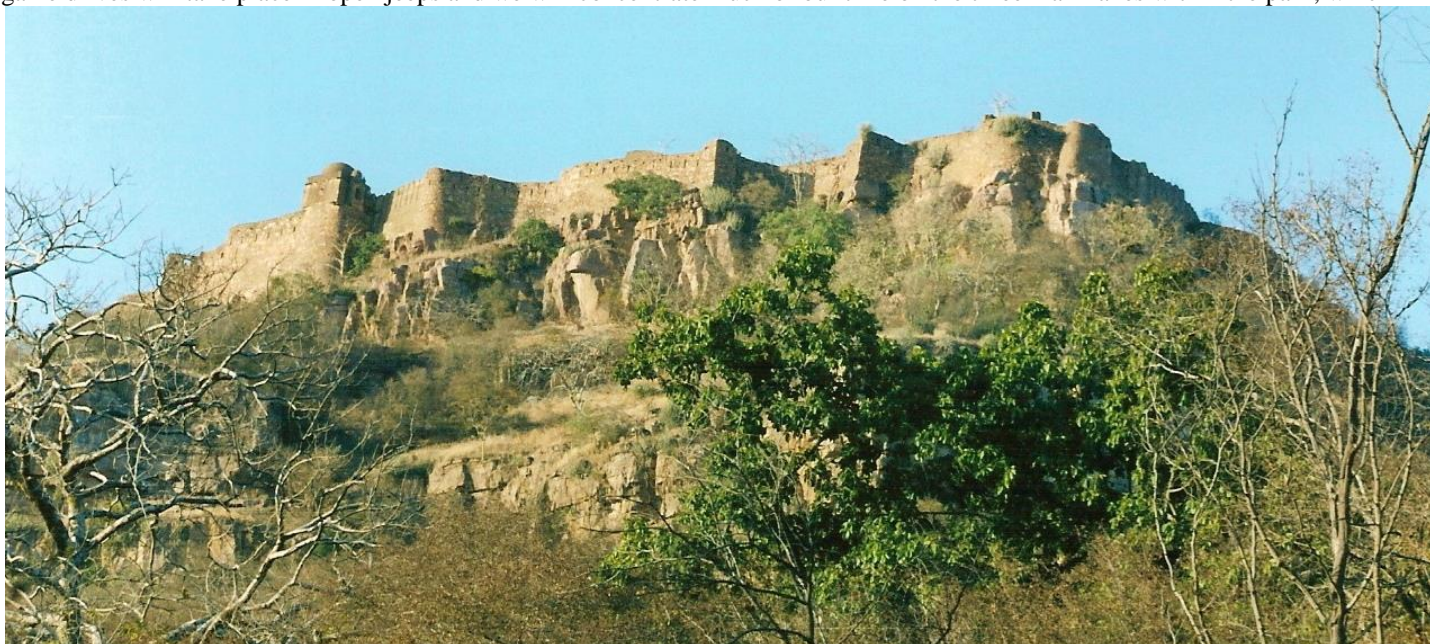
Day 15 - Jaipur to Ranthambhore National Park

We have two options this morning, as we can either enjoy a relaxed breakfast and the first-class facilities of our hotel, or we can take a first sunrise balloon flight for an astounding view of the Pink City. Both options are fine, as we have plenty of time before we make the short transfer to the renowned Ranthambhore National Park, which, until recent years, had enjoyed the deserved reputation of being one of the best reserves in the country for tiger sightings. This changed sadly a few years back, when Ranthambhore suffered a series of horrific poaching incidents in which a number of tigers were killed. Fortunately, under increased protection, several cubs

have been born recently to the surviving tigers and the population here is slowly recovering. We will this afternoon begin our search for this majestic but much persecuted cat and the many other species that flourish in what is still one of the premier reserves in India.

Days 16 to 19 - Ranthambhore National Park

The prospect of seeing a tiger at Ranthambhore during our four-day stay is now fairly high again and we also have a good chance to observe leopard and sloth bear. Although they are extremely rare and we would indeed be fortunate to encounter one, caracal are seen here and at nearby Sariska more than anywhere else and this is also a good reserve for a number of scavengers and small carnivores including striped hyena, Indian fox, golden jackal, small Indian civet, common palm civet, ruddy mongoose and honey badger. Our game drives will take place in open jeeps and we will concentrate much of our time on the three main lakes within the park, which



attract a large number of deer and antelope, as well as the tigers that come to hunt them. We also have the option of visiting the splendid Ranthambhore Fort, which commands a formidable strategic location 200m above the surrounding plains and has seen plenty of action during its chequered 1000-year history. The huge fort complex is one of the most impressive of many outstanding forts in Rajasthan and can be reached by a drive and a short hike for a dramatic view across the park. For an even more spectacular view, one morning will be reserved for one of the real highlights of our trip, a magical dawn balloon flight over the fabled jungles and lakes of Ranthambhore. As we drift almost timelessly above the trees, we will observe herds of deer and other animals in complete tranquillity and will have time to contemplate this wonderful natural theatre from a truly unique perspective. Other activities in the area include colourful displays of local folk music and dance, camel rides and a visit to a neighbouring area to see a population of blackbuck antelope.



Day 20 - Ranthambhore to Jhalawar

Almost wherever you turn in Rajasthan there is a magnificent fort or palace, usually both, and just when you think that you must have seen the very best of them, another looms on the horizon to amaze you. Today is a good example of this, as we travel south to areas that few visitors ever reach and yet still encounter superb examples of skilled Rajput craftsmanship and sophisticated engineering. Our



first stop is Bundi, a beautiful valley city famous for its step wells and dominated by the towering Taragarh Fort, a massive citadel perched imperiously above the city palace and handsome blue washed houses. Either side of lunch, we will discover the many secrets of this historic Mughal stronghold, including the exquisitely carved entrance gate and pillars of the 46m-deep Rani ki Baori step well, the gorgeous Chitrashala frescos and the striking 84 Pillared Cenotaph. The view of the fort and palace is particularly attractive across the shimmering waters of the artificial Nawal Sagar Lake and is further enhanced by the partially submerged temple within the lake. From Bundi we transfer further south in the early afternoon to Gagon Fort, a perfect illustration of a Jal Durg or water fort and the scene of much bloodshed throughout the course of its

turbulent history. Protected on three sides by the confluence of the Ahu and Kali Sindh rivers, construction began on the original fortification in the late 7th century and, although it is not now in the best condition, the ancient battlements and imposing walls still conjure evocative images of ferocious battles and heroic resistance. In terms of the impressive design at least, our final destination of the day is almost as memorable, as we drive a short distance to our hotel in Jhalawar, a classical Maharaja's palace set deep within a beautiful forest.

Days 21 to 23 - Jhalawar

Using our palatial hotel as a rather comfortable base, our next three days will be spent searching a variety of different habitats for an even more diverse range of rare wildlife. Having already explored sections to the north in Uttar Pradesh, we will have another opportunity to look for gharial and mugger crocodiles by boat within the National Chambal Sanctuary and to visit a large painted stork nesting colony. Smooth coated otter are also occasionally glimpsed from the water and wolf, striped hyena, jungle cat, golden jackal, Indian fox, Indian porcupine, Indian pangolin, small Indian civet and Indian flying fox are all resident within the protected areas either side of the river, which we will explore in our vehicle and on foot via a number of attractive hiking trails. We can also walk within the Sorsan Wildlife Sanctuary, which supports healthy populations of both blackbuck and chinkara antelope, as well as the endangered great Indian bustard, and the hills and dense forests of the nearby Darrah Wildlife Sanctuary are home to leopard, sloth bear, wolf, sambar deer and nilgai antelope. We will probably devote a full day to Darrah, as it is a large sanctuary that we can drive within, and there are a number of other activities available in the area, including canoeing, paragliding and abseiling down the sheer cliff walls that dwarf the pretty river valley.



Day 24 - Jhalawar to Chittorgarh and Udaipur

We transfer west this morning to Udaipur via Chittorgarh Fort, the largest ever constructed in India and the former capital of Mewar. Built on a rocky hill 180m above the plains, Chittor, as it is commonly known, embodies the Rajput ideals of valour, honour and glory and its battered walls and palace ruins bear testament to an illustrious and equally tumultuous past. Assured of a place deep within the folklore of Rajasthan, tales of great heroism and immeasurable tragedy are still recounted of Chittor today, most poignantly of the 13,000 palace women who, in 1303, burned themselves alive in the act of 'jauhar' rather than be taken by Muslim invaders and the 50,000 Mewar warriors who were subsequently massacred as they charged an overwhelming force in a hopeless attempt to avenge their women. Other similarly savage conflicts followed and as we explore the labyrinth of palaces, temples, gardens and reservoirs within the rambling interior, it is difficult not to dwell on the haunting emotions that this powerful citadel still evoke. The restored 36m Vijay Stambha or 'Victory Tower' is particularly moving, as is Queen Rani Padmini's lakeside palace, as she was the prize sought by the invading Sultan of Delhi and was the last of the women engulfed in the flames of the mass funeral pyre. After the fort was sacked for a final time by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1567 the rulers of Mewar moved their capital a short distance further west to Udaipur and this enchanting city of gleaming lakes and floating palaces is also our next destination. Known as the Venice of the East, Udaipur is one of the most romantic cities in India and this afternoon we will visit the classic water palaces of Jag Mandir and Jag Niwas, both of which were constructed on natural rock islands within Lake Pichola. With unparalleled views of the radiant city and lake, we will stop first at Jag Niwas or the Lake Palace, which is now a luxury hotel and the fairy-tale setting for our next two nights in Udaipur. After an opportunity to relax within the white marbled elegance of the palace interior and lunch overlooking the stunning courtyard lily pond, we can swim in the inviting pool until it is time to take a cruise to Jag Mandir, another royal residence, with gardens of finely scented jasmine trees and cooling fountains, attractively domed palaces and eight regal stone elephants guarding the entrance pavilion. After our tour, we will savour a fabulous sunset on the lake and an unforgettable view of the City Palace reflected in the glistening water.

Day 25 - Udaipur

If we have not yet taken a sunrise balloon flight, or if you simply cannot resist another, one can be arranged for either this morning or for the following day before we move on, as Udaipur is particularly scenic from the air. Whether viewed from the sky or ground, one of the main highlights of our tour today will be the City Palace, a sprawling complex of Rajput and Mughal influenced palaces, accessed by the prominent Tripolia Gate and stretching along the eastern bank of Lake Pichola. From the palace we will explore the maze of winding lanes and bazaars of the old walled city, including the many fortified entrance gates and Jagdish Mandir, a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu. In the afternoon we will visit the island gardens within Fateh Sagar Lake to the north of the city and the statues of Moti Magri or the Pearl Hill, which overlooks the lake. For an even better vantage point our final destination will be the deserted Monsoon Palace, which lies to the west of the city and towers almost 350m above Lake Pichola. After stopping here to admire another ravishing sunset, we will return to the city for one of the masterly puppet shows that are a colourful feature of life in Rajasthan.

Day 26 - Udaipur to Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary

We have an unhurried final morning in Udaipur, as we are due to visit the walled Jain temple complex at Ranakpur, which is only around a two-hour drive north, but is closed to those not of the Jain faith until midday. The slight delay is more than worthwhile, as the sculptured lightly coloured marble columns and panels of the main Chaumukha temple have been superbly crafted and the extraordinary ceilings and huge marble elephants have been carved in elaborate and loving detail. Meaning four-faced temple, Chaumukha has 80 domes and is supported by more than 1400 pillars, no two of which are the same. Many of the more intricate pieces have been painstakingly fashioned from single blocks of marble and one of the best examples is The Parsvanatha plaque which depicts a Jain teacher protected by a series of interwoven cobras. From one incredible sight we move directly to another, albeit of a slightly more robust nature, as we transfer further north to Kumbhalgarh Fort, one of the most visually impressive battlements in the country. Constructed in the 15th century at over 1000m on the Aravalli Hills, the indomitable Kumbhalgarh Fort commands



all it surveys and was appropriately known as 'The Eye of Mewar', as its 36km of ramparts snake along the border between the former warring regions of Marwar and Mewar. Basically a walled city enclosing numerous palaces and temples, with seven fortified gates protecting the main stronghold, soaring towers and ramparts so wide that six horsemen could ride abreast on them, Kumbhalgarh was considered impregnable to direct assault and indeed fell only once, inevitably perhaps, to a lack of drinking water after a punishing siege. Built in the 16th century at the summit of the citadel, the best vantage point is undoubtedly from the Badal

Mahal Palace, or 'Palace of Clouds', which very much has a view to match its fitting moniker. We will tarry here a while until the sun begins to fall away over the Thar Desert to the west, as the fort is illuminated for a short period at night and the already stirring scene is transformed into something truly magical. We have our own palace to head to this evening and although the splendid floodlit swimming pool of our nearby hotel cannot exactly compare to Kumbhalgarh, it is a very pleasant setting for us to while away the next three nights.



Days 27 to 28 - Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary

Knowing that another wonderful fort or palace is never far away in these ancient and tribal lands, we change our focus again today and resume our search for the rare and in some cases endangered wildlife that Rajasthan supports. Settled within the shadow of the



fort, Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary receives few visitors, but it is an important habitat for a number of species and is almost certainly the best location in India to see wolves, as there are several packs within the vicinity and they are often visible. Other carnivores occur and are observed reasonably regularly, including leopard, striped hyena, golden jackal, Indian fox, jungle cat and small Indian civet, as well as the shambling and endearing sloth bear, wild boar, chinkara antelope and chousingha or four-horned antelope. During the dry season the wolves are generally seen near waterholes and we will spend two days searching for these and other animals in our open game vehicle and on foot, as there is a good trail that we will be able to take with our qualified local guide. Horse safaris are an excellent way to view both the animals and the many bird species that have been recorded here and we will again have the opportunity to spotlight for smaller, less commonly observed nocturnal mammals. When we are not out looking for

wildlife, our evenings will include traditional Rajasthani folk dance and music and our trip may also coincide with the colourful Mewar festival, one of many festivals in a region renowned for the colourful celebrations of a staggeringly rich history and culture.

Day 29 - Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary to Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary

Instead of continuing north to Jodhpur today, as most tours tend to do from Kumbhalgarh, we turn back on ourselves slightly and travel south-west to Mount Abu, the only hill station in Rajasthan. As with all of the hill stations across India, many of which were



founded in idyllic settings by the British during the Raj, Abu was constructed at altitude to escape the worst of the fierce summer heat and was formerly used as a sanatorium for colonial troops. It remains a peaceful retreat and is largely visited for the five distinctive Jain temples at Dilwara, which, if anything, are even finer than the temples at Ranakpur. As they again only accept non-Jains from noon, we will enjoy more of the delicious local cuisine in the shaded grounds of our hotel, before visiting the temples later this afternoon after a refreshing swim. Described as a 'dream in marble', and rivalling the Taj Mahal in terms of artistry, the temples at Dilwara are among the finest on the planet and are as close to architectural perfection as you are likely to see. The sheer quality of the ornately carved columns, humbling domed ceilings and meticulously detailed arches is simply overwhelming and the superb technique on display here is possibly best illustrated by the polished marble elephants that adorn these magnificent edifices, perhaps in remembrance of the many actual animals used to transport the marble when work began on the first temple a thousand years ago. We have the rest

of the afternoon to savour this flawless spectacle before we head to the lively and aptly named Sunset Point for a panoramic view of the sun disappearing across the plains.

Days 30 to 31 - Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary

Sit upon a rocky plateau some 22km long and overlooking verdant evergreen forests and gentle valleys, Mount Abu is a cool, fertile oasis for all forms of wildlife and is the only place in Rajasthan where it is possible to view wild orchids. The main town sits beside Nakki Lake within the Aravalli mountain range, which dominates much of the landscape of central Rajasthan, as it runs diagonally from Gujarat in the west almost as far north as Delhi. Given both the topography and biodiversity of the area, it is gratifying that a

large part of it has been designated as a wildlife sanctuary and this is where we will spend the majority of the next two days. A combination of dry deciduous and sub-tropical forest, the sanctuary supports a healthy and growing population of sloth bear, which are regularly encountered on the attractive hiking trails, and other notable residents include leopard, jungle cat, small Indian civet, common palm civet, honey badger, striped hyena, golden jackal, Indian fox, Indian hare, wild boar, Indian porcupine, Indian hedgehog, the Indian grey and ruddy mongooses, Indian pangolin and the southern plains grey langur, which was formerly considered a subspecies of the hanuman langur, but which has now been accorded full species status and is common throughout much of central and northern India. Of almost 250 bird types documented in the vicinity, three endemics are considered to be among the most important, the grey junglefowl, rock bush quail and the red spurfowl and four highly vulnerable vulture



species nest among the rocky outcrops of the forested hills, the Egyptian, Indian, white-backed, and red-headed vultures. The Egyptian variety is currently classified as endangered and the other three as being critically so. As many of our target animals are habitually nocturnal, we will also search for them at night with spotlights and other optional activities include tranquil horse rides, abseiling and trips to see the crocodiles at Trevor's Tank, an artificial lake named after the British engineer who designed it and another good spot to look for sloth bear, particularly during the spring months when the tempting ber fruits begin to ripen.



Day 32 - Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary to Bera

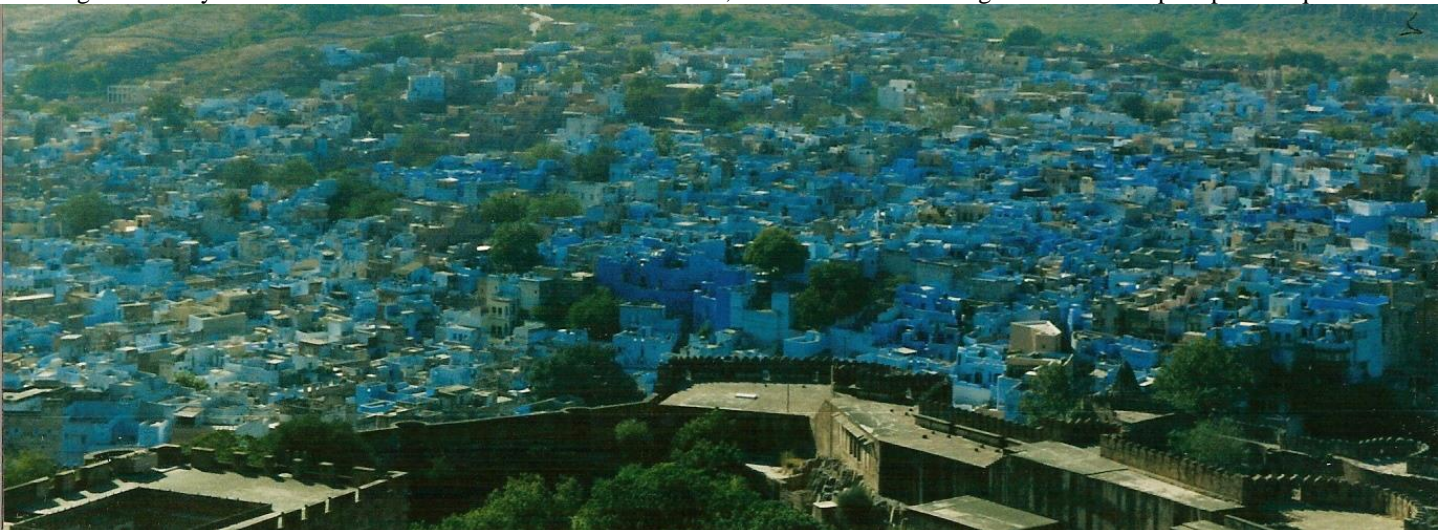
We will leave Mount Abu early this morning and venture north once more for Bera and an opportunity to devote our full attention to one of the most impressive and resourceful cats on the continent, the leopard. Without tigers for competition beyond Sariska and Ranthambhore, leopards thrive in much of Rajasthan and can adapt to almost any environment, from dense jungles to sparse arid deserts. The area that we will spend the best part of three days exploring is not within a national park or reserve, but it is still one of the premier locations to view leopards outside of Africa. It is also one of the most scenic and relaxing destinations of our tour, where we will experience superb Rajput hospitality and immerse ourselves in the delightful atmosphere of a resort owned by people with an intense passion for the wildlife that they will go out of their way to show us. After settling into the charming stone cottages within the beautifully manicured gardens of our resort, where peafowl proudly display and a colourful array of birds dance between the mango and ashoka trees, we will familiarise ourselves with the local hills and forests by taking a first safari to the stunning Jawai Dam.

Days 33 to 34 - Bera

Although the principal objective of our stay is to observe leopards, we can certainly expect to encounter several of the animals previously detailed and the late-night spotlighting excursions are tailored specifically to introduce us to many of the nocturnal creatures that inhabit the local forests, including leopards. We will leave before sunrise each morning to increase our chances still further and on one of the days our adept guide will accompany us on an enjoyable hike to the dam, which is also a perfect spot for a picnic and an invigorating swim in the specially designed local pool. The horse riding organised by our hosts is first class, as we get the chance to canter and gallop across sections of baked desert, and before we depart on a final night game drive we will be treated to the tantalising and superbly seasoned dishes of a traditional Rajasthani barbeque. The success rate for leopards here is exceptionally high and we are also likely to see many other solitary animals, most notably sloth bear, striped hyena and possibly even the highly elusive rusty spotted cat, which makes its home within the dry scrublands and jagged rocks of the imposing Aravalli hills.

Day 35 - Bera to Jodhpur

It is with a heavy heart that we leave our enchanting lodge this morning, but we have one final dawn safari to relish and will hopefully depart with a host of abiding memories and some new friends. Our drive north to Jodhpur is not a long one and we should reach the dazzling 'Blue City' in time for a late lunch at Balsamand Lake, an artificial lake set against a backdrop of picturesque hills and



overlooked from the terrace of our palatial heritage hotel. Created in the vibrant red sandstone of the region and situated within expansive landscaped gardens just beyond the northern boundary of the city, this will be our isolated retreat for the next two nights, from which we will explore the busy streets and markets of Jodhpur. Originally the capital of Marwar and the second city of Rajasthan, like most cities in the region, the Jodhpur skyline is dominated by its defensive fortifications, in this case the Mehrangarh Fort, which rises like a colossus from the surrounding sea of blue decorated houses. One of the largest forts in India, the walls are 36m high in places and a staggering 20m wide, Mehrangarh was described by Rudyard Kipling as ‘the creation of angels, fairies and giants’ and we will begin to appreciate his meaning as we discover the stark contrast between the intimidating battlements and the extravagantly ornamented palaces they protect within. The Mehrangarh Museum is regarded as the finest of its type in Rajasthan and incorporates these precious palaces, including the lavishly gilded ceiling



and colourful stained glass windows of the Moti Mahal or ‘Pearl Palace’, so named because of the finely crushed shells that were combined with the lime plaster to add a pearl-like lustre to the walls. Exotic dancers once regaled the courtiers amid the gold-leaf decoration and beautiful frescos of the Phool Mahal audience chamber and the Jhanki Mahal or ‘Peeping Palace’ still contains the Maharaja’s cradle, an ingenious mechanical device, complete with attendant guardian angels, designed to slowly rock the infant prince or princess to sleep. The many overhanging carved balconies are a particular feature of the fort and the armoury houses an unrivalled collection of weapons, including bejewelled swords and daggers and a number of early firearms. Antique cannons litter the ramparts and it is from these that we will linger to absorb the superlative view, as the golden rays of the late afternoon sun illuminate the blue washed buildings clustered directly beneath the fortress and the steep hill on which it rests. As the sun gradually sets, we will make our way to the floodlit terrace restaurant for an enthralling evening of traditional music and dance, 140m above the glittering lights of the surrounding city.

Day 36 - Jodhpur

We have a full day to discover Jodhpur, or the Sun City as it is also known, and will begin within the pulsating narrow lanes of the Old City, which is encircled by 10km of defensive wall and seven grand entrance gates. Our stops will include Taleti Mahal Palace, built for one of the Maharaja’s favoured concubines and Sardar Bazaar, a vibrant area spread around the impressive clock tower, where street entertainers vie for your attention and a host of merchants sell high quality local fabrics and hangings and a fantastic array of colourful spices and exotic fruits. Our next stop will be Jaswant Thada, a vaulted white marble memorial to Maharaja Jaswant



Singh II, a much loved former ruler of Marwar who died in the late 19th century. As part of it is now a hotel, we will take lunch at Umaid Bhawan Palace, a huge edifice built partly to provide employment for thousands of workers during the great famines of the late 1920s. Designed by the Edwardian architect Henry Lanchester and constructed in yellow sandstone to distinguish it from the many other imperial buildings in the region, Umaid Bhawan is said to be the last great Indian palace and was one of the largest private residences on the planet. With a renaissance styled central dome and several resplendent symmetrical towers, it was constructed entirely without mortar, instead the hand carved stones all interlock, and a section of it remains the home of the current Maharaja. Before we leave the main

city area for our final destination of the day, there will be an opportunity, if it appeals, to experience a rather different perspective of both the city and Mehrangarh Fort, as a zip line course has been installed around the battlements and it is now possible to spend a

couple of hours 'flying' over various points in and around the fort on steel slides of between 70m and 300m. On a more sedate note we will transfer the short distance to the gardens and royal cenotaphs at Mandore, which lies just north of the city, within a few kilometres of our hotel at Balsamand Lake. With a series of contrasting, but complementary red sandstone tombs set within the pretty green gardens, and literally hundreds of langur monkeys posing on significant monuments against the bright blue sky, Mandore is a pleasant and relaxing final stop on our busy city tour.

Day 37 - Jodhpur to Jaisalmer

Although we have been on the edge of it for some time now, this morning we drive west to Jaisalmer and the heart of the breathtaking Thar Desert, which forms a natural barrier between India and Pakistan. Even the journey through the desert to Jaisalmer is spectacular and as we approach the 'Golden City', shimmering like a mirage across the heat seared sand, we get our first hazy view of the golden sandstone of Jaisalmer Fort, a timeless sentinel watching over its people from the heights of Trikuta Hill. Given its strategic importance, Jaisalmer lies on the ancient silk road, a major trading route serving mainland Europe, Arabia and Asia for almost 3000



years, this atmospheric fort has witnessed much conflict over the centuries and is my favourite of all the extraordinary fortresses of Rajasthan. This afternoon we can admire the three huge fort walls that much of the population of Jaisalmer still live within, as well as the equally splendid entrance gates and the various Jain temples, which rival even the majesty on display at Ranakpur and Dilwara. The view of the desert from the top of the royal palace is glorious and in and around the fort we will discover many of the famous havelis, the homes of rich merchants intent on displaying their wealth in grand building projects, with ornate carved facades and elaborately fashioned jali screens. Following a brief visit to the arresting Bada Bagh cenotaphs, our day will end at the ghats of Gadi Sagar Lake, where we can enjoy the beautiful sunset over the scattered temples and shrines before we make the short journey to our hotel, a former royal palace constructed in the gorgeous honey-yellow sandstone of the region.



Days 38 to 40 - Jaisalmer

For all the wonders of the city, the real star of Jaisalmer is the mesmerising Thar Desert, which, despite its desolate appearance, is astonishingly beautiful and is actually a haven for many species superbly adapted to the harsh desert conditions. We will visit three main areas within this arid wilderness, Desert National Park and the undulating sand dunes at both Sam and Khuri. We will initially concentrate on the national park, which supports populations of blackbuck and chinkara antelope, wild cat, or desert cat as it is known locally, wolf, caracal, Indian fox and desert fox, a subspecies of the red fox, Indian hare, collared hedgehog and several small rodent species, including the pygmy and Indian hairy-footed gerbil and the Indian desert jird. Indian rollers and bee-eaters add fluttering dashes of colour to the austere landscape, but the main attraction in terms of birds is the great Indian bustard, which is fairly easy to observe here. We will spend most of our time searching in an open jeep, although we can also take walking trails for a better opportunity to encounter saw-scaled viper, monitor lizard and spiny-tailed lizard. In a land of horses and camels, we will have had



plenty of opportunity to take camel rides previously, but the best in terms of traditional desert scenery can be experienced at Sam, where the Sahara-like dunes are rippled and sculpted by the wind and the golden sand glazes in the glorious rays of the late afternoon sun. After quietly watching the spellbinding desert sunset, we will spend a night at Sam in a luxurious desert camp, where local dancers and singers will evoke an age of kings and conquest around a roaring campfire and we will fall asleep in spacious white tents under a carpet of stars. Khuri offers a different, but no less impressive view of the Thar Desert and we can again ride camels and walk among the mystical sandy hills, where the baked mud homes of the rural villages blend effortlessly into the tranquil landscape.

Day 41 - Jaisalmer to Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary

We stay within the desert as we travel north east this morning to the Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary, a green oasis situated just 30km from the medieval city of Bikaner. Renowned for the migratory birds that congregate around the attractive lake during the winter, particularly the black-bellied sandgrouse, the forests of Gajner also harbour a large variety of mammals, which can often be observed from the exterior of the striking red sandstone palace, perfectly located on the edge of the lake and our home for the next three nights. We can explore the reserve by jeep or on foot this afternoon and other options for our stay include boat trips, horse riding and camel safaris across the dunes of the surrounding desert.



Days 42 to 43 - Gajner and Bikaner

One of our days at Gajner will be reserved for a tour of the finely decorated palaces, temples and havelis of nearby Bikaner, a walled city protected by the daunting ramparts and bastions of the Junagarh Fort, one of the best preserved forts in Rajasthan, partly due to the fact that its formidable defences have never been breached. Built by a succession of rulers over 400 years, Junagarh jealously guards almost 40 lavish palaces, from the sumptuous red and gold designs of Anup Mahal to the complementary blue hues of Badal Mahal or the 'Cloud Palace'. Chandra Mahal and Phool Mahal, the 'Moon' and 'Flower' palaces respectively, are another two richly adorned treasures, as is the Karan Mahal public audience hall, and the fort museum contains an extensive collection of costumes, miniature portraits and weapons, as well as a beautiful old Sopwith biplane. After lunch and a chance to wander around the bazaars and havelis of the old city, we will venture beyond the city walls to Lalgah Palace, an immaculately designed and crafted 20th century palace, set amid glorious formal gardens with a sublime view of the Thar Desert. We also have the option of visiting the Karni Mata Temple about 30km south of Bikaner, a Hindu temple famous for the sacred black rats that are fed by the priests and swarm freely around the shrine in great numbers.

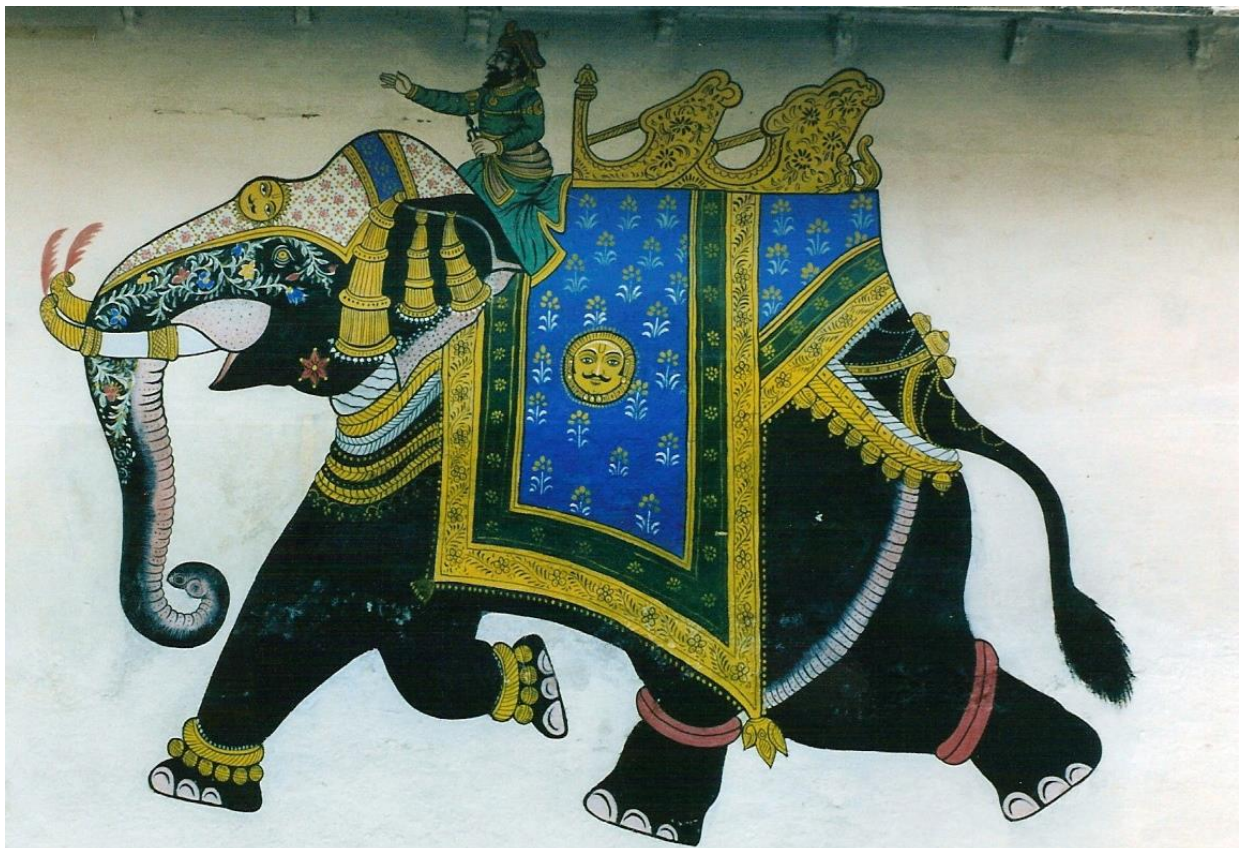


Day 44 - Gajner to Delhi

Today is the final full day of our memorable journey and we have the option of delaying our departure for a few hours this morning or of leaving Gajner early to ensure that we arrive in Delhi in time to have one last look around the city or to spend longer relaxing by the alluring blue pool of our elegant hotel. If you prefer the evening city atmosphere to a night relaxing at the hotel, a tour can be arranged of the many floodlit buildings and monuments, followed by a wonderful meal in my favourite Delhi restaurant, a small and friendly establishment in a charming leafy setting.

Day 45 - Delhi

Our expedition ends today with another opportunity to say goodbye to our guide and by now very good friend, who will make one last effort on our behalf, the transfer from the hotel to the airport for the international flight home.



Additional Options

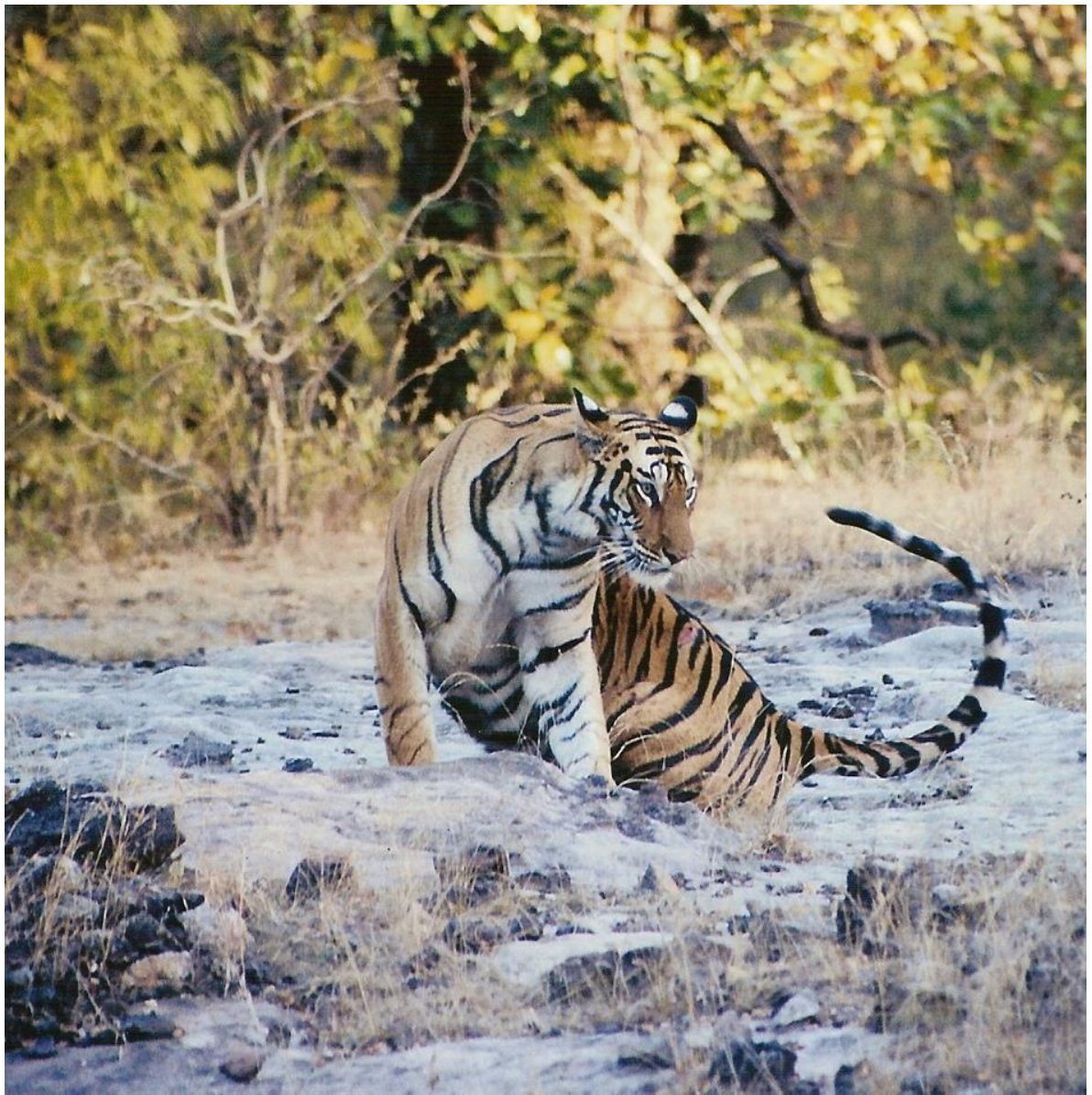
This tour is designed to highlight the many diverse aspects that delightfully combine to make Rajasthan such a unique and rewarding destination. However, it can be adjusted to suit any requirements and tailored exactly to your interests and the amount of time you have available.



If you are more interested in spectacular wildlife than spectacular architecture, Rajasthan is very easily combined with a visit to Gujarat and the Asiatic lions of Gir National Park and if you would like to more or less guarantee that you will see a wild tiger, the national parks of Bandhavgarh, Kanha and Pench are all easily accessible in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh, as is Corbett National Park to the north east of Delhi in the foothills of the Himalayas. If you prefer to spend the majority of your time within Rajasthan, specialist tours can be arranged visiting any number of historic sites, forts or temples and it is always possible to coincide a trip with a specific festival or fair, ranging from the Desert Festival of Jaisalmer and the Camel Festival of Bikaner to the

Elephant Festival of Jaipur and the Gangaur Festival, which is celebrated all over Rajasthan. Two of the more remarkable tours include the high luxury of the Palace on Wheels, an extravagantly furnished train which visits some of the state's major destinations and, in complete contrast, a camel train, a serene window to another age, where you will traverse maybe 40km of splendidly isolated desert by day and spend your nights beneath the starry heavens. In the 'land of kings' almost anything is possible and it is up to you to choose your own Jewels of Rajasthan and your own perfect royal adventure.







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