

Trip Review



Great India & Nepal Tiger Safari

Trip review from a 2007 "Signature Trip"

By Will Weber (JOURNEYS Director)

In March 2007, 16 JOURNEYS travelers visited some of the premier parks and reserves of India and Nepal to observe and photograph the unique wildlife of this area. We found lots of animals, including tigers and much more.

In Search of Tigers

Tigers are not doing well in their native range in India, Nepal, or other areas of Asia. Despite extensive lip-service, lots of international assistance, management plans, designated sanctuaries, exhaustive research and extensive media coverage, India and Nepal have probably fewer tigers now than when world attention was drawn to their endangered plight in the *Project Tiger* program started in the early 1970's. Our trip was an effort to better understand tigers, their eco-system and the prospects for their survival.

We chose March as the best month to see tigers. Days are not too hot, but the chill and fog of winter are gone. Forests are bare of leaves and grasses. Prey species concentrate around fewer water-holes during this dry time. Native trees are in bloom and migratory birds offer a colorful punctuation to the local environments.

Our group formed in Delhi and met our Indian naturalist guide, Avi Sakhrel. Avi is a very good birder and he knew each of the places we visited well. Always ready at an early hour and prepared to talk into the night about Indian conservation and wildlife, he combined authority and decisiveness with empathy and sensitivity to the concerns of each traveler. He easily gained our trust and confidence.

- Our guide, Avi



Pench and Other Parks

In India we focused our search on five sanctuaries: Pench, Kanha, Bandavgarh, Ranthambor and Keoladeo Ghana with diversions to the great archeological sites of Khajuraho and the Taj Mahal. First, we flew to Nagpur in the geographical center of India. It seemed fitting to start our search for the the “King of Beasts” in the heart of India. Our first two nights were spent in Pench. It was soon evident why we were traveled in small sport utility vehicles rather than a larger coach. The road to Pench wound through a forest, sometimes twisting between trees, over barely-bridged creeks and finally to the relatively new Pench Reserve.



-Grey Langur

This area offered some of the best overall wildlife viewing of the trip including thousands of spotted deer, grey langurs, gaur, wild boar, sambur and many species of birds. Within this reserve and at most other parks, we traveled in open 4x4 jeeps. While we did not see a tiger here, we reflected on this park as one of our favorites of the trip owing to the beauty of the place, the overall abundance of wildlife and the very pleasant accommodations and staff at Pench Jungle Camp. One night we enjoyed a torrential thunder and lightning storm so powerful it seemed to include an earthquake and a hurricane for long moments. We all stayed dry.

Kanha Has Tigers

Next we drove about six hours to Kanha National Park, one of India’s oldest and best known tiger sanctuaries with a core area of 940 square kilometers. From our base at the Wild Chalet, we made morning and evening trips into the park to search for game. Most of us saw multiple tigers here. In certain areas the range, movement and habits of individual groups are well known to the local drivers and park guides who accompany each vehicle. In the morning a team of elephants and mahouts go out early searching for tigers in off road locations. If they are successful, arrangements can be made (at a extra cost) to travel by elephant to view and photograph a tiger briefly from close range. I did this and succeeded in getting closer to a wild tiger than I ever had before, as attested by the picture here. While this experience was interesting, it was a bit contrived and not nearly as satisfying as encountering a tiger by chance even with a shorter or more distant view.

-Kanha Tiger



Fortunately, we did have such “natural” encounters here, including one of our group’s vehicles enjoying a large male tiger walking just a few feet behind the jeep. Another group saw a leopard hunting, and we all saw swamp deer in large herds. I enjoyed driving the extensive, uncrowded park roads just holding the hope of seeing a tiger or other game. My best experience in Kanha was coming upon a pack of wild dogs, or dholes, stalking a spotted deer. The deer bolted with five dholes in hot pursuit over a hill and out of site. Again here, the graceful, stately grey langurs were abundant. Kanha deserved more than the two days we spent there.

Bandhavgarh is Beautiful

Another six hour drive took us to Bandhavgarh National Park. Considerably smaller than Kanha, this park never-the-less has a good tiger population and a reputation for frequent tiger sightings. Extensive water resources make the park attractive to many other species of mammals and birds. At least four species of now-rare Gyps genus vultures nest on the cliffs of the park. Several vehicles from our group had the pleasure of watching a young male tiger at close range for more than an hour. It was my most fulfilling tiger experience of the trip. Some of us also observed a leopard here as well as jungle cat, Indian gazelle, gaur, barking deer and sambur. Our accommodations at Nature Heritage Resort included some of the best meals of the trip, nice rooms and a clear concern for environmental issues.

-Bandhavgarh Tiger



Contemplating Khajuraho and the Taj

We drove another six hours to the famous 10th Century Chandela Dynasty temples of Khajuraho. Twenty-two of the original 85 temples survived an Islamic invasion in the 1600's and today provide a sensual, uninhibited depiction of everyday life of distant times. No tigers here, but plenty of beauty to contemplate.

-Taj Mahal



We travelled by coach and train to Agra. It was an easy pleasant ride on the train, but an evening arrival in Agra reminded us how fortunate it was to have our transfer and hotel arrangements made in advance. The Taj Mahal is one of the very few good things about Agra! We left for the Taj tour at dawn and unexpectedly saw a partial eclipse of the sun wonderfully tempered by the early morning haze over Agra. I've been to the Taj five times over the last 35 years, but each time I visit it is more amazing. The precision, scale, detail, materials and craftsmanship rank it far above any other monuments of the past or present. The soft, pink, dawn light

perfectly highlights the delicate beauty of the structure. This is a must-see site for any first time India visit.

Keoladeo Ghana and Ranthambor National Parks

Our final destinations in India were the Keoladeo Ghana and Ranthambor National Parks. Both premier sites for wildlife in recent times, they now reveal the problems and inadequacies of nature preservation in India. Ghana was nearly dry after a poor monsoon and the increasing demand of water for agriculture and cities. Fifteen years ago when I visited the park I felt it must be one of the richest bird sanctuaries on earth. There are still a few birds including common and sarus cranes, but the park is overrun with domestic cattle and most of the jheels (or lakes) are dry. Ranthambor still has a reputation for tigers, but we saw none and there was more talk of tiger poaching than tiger sightings. It is still a beautiful park with an historic fort, beautiful lakes, many birds and other wildlife. Our accommodations at Sawai Modhpur Lodge were excellent.

Nepal is Safe

Eight of us flew from Delhi to Nepal on Jet Airways, an excellent, on-time Indian airline with new planes and good meals. The skies were clear enough to offer a great view of the Himalayas on the flight in. The JOURNEYS Nepal staff greeted us on arrival with flower garlands. I was a bit fearful that I would find Kathmandu a depleted and dilapidated city after all the turmoil of the last five years.

That was not the case. Petrol and electric power are sometimes in short supply, but generally the city looked clean, thriving and more orderly than I expected. The Thamel section of the city near our Hotel Malla, was clean, welcoming and colorful.

I first visited Kathmandu as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1970. The city has morphed unrecognizably from those days. While the famous temples and ancient palace squares are actually in better repair now than 37 years ago due to international support for preservation, getting around Kathmandu is more perilous and most of the gardens and rice paddies now grow haphazard brick and cement apartment buildings.

-Boddhanath Temple



Maoists in the Mainstream?

But for all esthetic urban shortcomings, the Nepalese are still friendly and welcoming of tourists. Here and there the Maoist leader Prachandra scowls from red political posters reminding people of their recent legacy of extortion and vigilante justice. But most educated Nepalese feel that with the Maoists committed to participate in a democratic government, the future looks much more promising than the past. It seems that the one thing all political parties and contestants agree upon is the importance of preserving a safe and welcoming environment for tourists. One feels no danger walking around Kathmandu. Our trekking guides tell me that all of our favorite routes are safe to travel. There are still headlines about unrest in remote parts of Nepal unlikely to be visited by foreign travelers. The US Embassy maintains an almost fanatical suspicion about Maoist long term malcontent, but even they admit that no American has been injured by Maoists and if forced to pay tax for passage on a trek, we would not be subject to prosecution for supporting terrorists.

Consular warnings and advisories have greatly reduced the number of Americans visiting Nepal, but there are more tourists from Asia and Europe than ever before.

Rhino Round Up

On this trip many of our group enjoyed the Everest view flight trip. We all visited Pasupatinath, Boddhanath, the Old Bazaar and Patan. We flew to Chitwan National Park to continue our safari experience. There are lots of tigers in Chitwan, but in the recent years of lax protection, an unknown number were killed along with many rhinoceroses.

Here in Chitwan an elephant back ride means a real ride in the jungle lasting for a couple of hours. Two to four people ride in a simple wooden framed burlap saddle called a howdah. A mahout straddles the elephants neck and steers the massive mount with his big toes deftly applied behind the ears. It is a fun way to travel even without wildlife sightings. However, we did see many Indian one-horned rhinoceroses.



We also saw spotted deer, hog deer, barking deer, wild boar and two species of crocodile. We made three elephant back trips and took a nature hike and a dugout canoe trip. As a birder, I felt I was here in Chitwan for the peak of the Spring migration. Some participants rated a visit to a nearby Tharu village as the highlight of the Nepal visit.

-Chitwan Rhino

Six days in Nepal is not nearly enough time to experience, or even remember, what a great destination this country is for eco-tourism. We all look forward to our next and longer visit with optimistic expectations.

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