



Cinda Hunter

Beloved Things



India (Rajasthan and three National Parks) 2008

This was the trip my sister Penny, her husband and friends took to India and it was such a fabulous itinerary and had such great pics, we have added it to my trip stories!

December is a great month to travel in India. It's winter and it's cool and dry as the monsoons are over. Our trip included the following destinations: Jaisalmer, Ranakpur and Kumbhalgahr, Udaipur, Pushkar,, Ranthambhore National Park, Keoladeo National Park (Bharatpur), Corbett National Park and we had lots of advice and guidance from Cinda when we were travelling in places she has visited on her buying trips.

The road to Jaisalmer from Jodhpur goes through a desert area and unlike most other Indian roads was surprisingly quiet. It is a major sandstone mining region and it was fascinating to see that walls, roofs and even fence-posts were carved out of sandstone.

The roadsides are planted with acacia trees which are all carefully shielded from goats and cows and have special trenches for watering. The objective is to keep the desert and sands at bay.



Jaisalmer is built on a hill and our hotel was right on the ramparts. Its roof terraces and rooms overlooked the old town, the distant desert and acres of enormous wind turbines and it was a glorious place to have breakfast or chai in the early morning or evening. Even though it was winter the temperature was really comfortable – never too hot or too cold. Jaisalmer fort is unusual in that it still has a functioning, inhabited town within its walls. The problem is that all the water and sewage from the town is undermining and ruining the fort.

At Jaisalmer we stayed inside the old fort at Killa Bhawan, a really quirky small hotel which had apparently won various awards. It is Swiss-owned and furnished beautifully with old Indian furniture. The excellent Nepalese staff supplied us with streams of really delicious masala chai (tea made from boiled milk with cardamom, ginger and black pepper plus LOTS of sugar – seriously addictive!).

Jaisalmer is a tourist mecca attracting backpackers and the narrow streets are crammed with shops selling the same things we were to see everywhere – bad “cashmere” pashminas, real hippy style clothing, miniature paintings, lots of crafts and artefacts purporting to be old but actually fake and overpriced. Every household seemed to own at least one cow and they were everywhere and so was their shit which you had to try to step over in crowded narrow streets. It is a desert area and there seemed to be little fodder growing anywhere in the vicinity but the cows were fed by their owners but also snacked on anything they could scrounge in the streets – cardboard seemed to be a particular favourite. Cows were just such a part of the Indian landscape and horribly photogenic so I'll have to seriously cut back on cow pics. There were also pigs, some awfully cute but since their function was primarily garbage disposal, ultimately not very appealing).



Jaisalmer, Old Fort



Jaisalmer, view of town from ramparts of fort



Streets of Jaisalmer

We also had what was probably one of our best meals in India (where we had LOTS of wonderful meals) at a small local restaurant that was not in a tourist area. The other guests in the restaurant were incredibly helpful when it came to advising us what to order and it was to be the pattern of our stay in India – people are so helpful and friendly and not in the least bit aggressive.



We visited the old town of Jaisalmer, notably the exquisite havelis, homes of rich families, mainly Jains who were the traders and merchants. On a more human scale than the palaces and usually in narrow streets, the havelis also featured the intricately carved sandstone casements. These kept the buildings cool and aerated but also provided women in purdah with a view of life in the streets. The stone carving craft was not dying out as many homes were still being built in the traditional.

We were there about two weeks after the Mumbai bombings and there is no doubt that Indian tourism had taken a knock with lots of cancellations, obviously compounded by the global financial situation. Jaisalmer is near the Pakistan border and seething with Indian army encampments and troops doing manoeuvres. We also flew to Jodhpur from Delhi and the airport is a military airfield and there was lots of military activity.

Most of the time, like the Hindu population, we ate vegetarian food and it was so delicious that we rarely even wanted to eat meat. Where South Africans seem to feel that Indian food has to self-combust, real Indian food was remarkable for its subtlety and the variety of the spices and flavours. We were also completely addicted to their breads: naan, parathas (especially stuffed parathas), rotis, chapattis – we seldom bothered with rice! Cauliflower, peas, potatoes, okra, aubergines and paneer (a compressed cottage cheese), pakoris (dumplings) in the most wonderful sauces plus dals from lentils and chickpeas – we were in heaven! Then of course there is lassi – a drink made from yoghurt (or usually curd) and sweetened with fruit or sugar (or available salted). The most sublime versions were saffron lassi from Mashrimal Lassi near the clocktower in the old market in Jodhpur – so thick and creamy that you ate it with a spoon (and licked the cup for the last vestige) and another in a local restaurant in Jodhpur (where we also got a great meal on our second night there) which was packed with pistachios and dried fruit. Unfortunately it was not the mango season as mango lassi is apparently “to die for” but we did have stunning mango lassi at the “canteen” restaurant at our hotel in Jaipur, probably made with frozen mango. And as mentioned the chai which we must have consumed gallons of! I was seriously “dairied-out” by the time we got home.

We were bound for Ranakpur and Kumbhalgahr which were to be some of the unexpected highlights of our trip. The desert landscape changed suddenly into unexpectedly beautiful rugged, wooded hilly country with intensive farming in small plots which had been painstakingly cleared of stones and rocks and walled. In December, the main crop was mustard which was flowering in a blazing sea of yellow wherever you looked. The crops (also winter wheat and vegetables) were being watered from earth canals. The water was being drawn from wells using water wheels pulled by cows.



Ranakpur is the site of the second largest Jain temple in India. “Jainism is an ancient Indian religion that teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to live a life of harmlessness and renunciation.” (thanks Wikipedia). This includes a form of vegetarianism that excludes root vegetables notably potatoes, garlic and onions (to preserve the lives of these plants) and it is likely that Hindus became vegetarian and avoid taking life, notably of cows, due to strong Jain influences. Jains run animal shelters and bird hospitals all over India.



The Jain Temple at Ranakpur

We had seen two small Jain temples in Jaisalmer but they were not particularly memorable so we were not expecting the large exquisite white marble temple nestling in the hills. The interior was dominated by intricately carved white marble pillars – each one different. Light came in through a courtyard and through four “porch-like” areas each with a view into the hills and a place to sit and contemplate the exterior and interior. The temple exuded a deep sense of peace and tranquillity which even the loud voices of the tour-guides accompanying various groups could not dispel.



Kumbhalgahr was a wonderful old fort and palace surrounded by 35km of wall (wide enough for a span of EIGHT horses) which contained around 360 temples (Hindu, Jain, Buddhist). The wall followed the hills and contours, traversing up and down the hills and valleys. The surrounding area was a nature reserve (formerly a maharajahs hunting area) and it would have been great to have spent a bit longer in this area which was also rural and under-populated.



One of our over-riding impressions of Indian cities is the level of industriousness. Everyone is hard at work until late at night whether it be in small well-stocked shops along the roads, fixing bikes, cars appliances, making things, pulling laden handcarts or rickshaws with passengers or goods, selling fruit or vegetables or food in stalls everywhere. It is a constant buzz of activity (plus exuberant colours).





In the rural areas the women always wear saris and tend to draw these across their faces when in public. They even wear saris when building roads, carrying stone in quarries, carrying wood or feed for livestock, working in the fields. Since the saris are in shocking pink, orange, bright yellow, acid green, red and every shade of bright in between, they look sensational... particularly as they seem to glide and float when they walk – probably why Westerners look silly in saris!

Udaipur has been described as the Venice of India and highly recommended as a romantic destination. I'm afraid we rechristened it Udaipoo as the lake on which it is situated was smelly and green and full of rubbish but I do believe it is beautiful when there have been good rains and most people I've spoken to LOVED Udaipur. . As we arrived at the Kankarwa Haveli (hotel in a heritage house) we looked out of our very picturesque window onto the lake and it looked lovely. Until you had a closer look and saw what was

floating in it and how all the people who came down to bathe and wash their clothing (and even clean their teeth) were pushing aside whatever was floating on the surface to try to get at the water. The view from the rooftop terrace over the lake and the distant Aravalli mountains at sunset and sunrise was glorious.

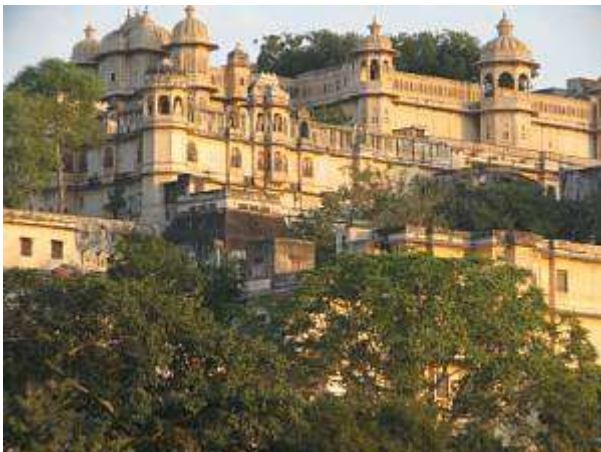
However, the palace at Udaipur is spectacular and again filled with extraordinary artefacts. It is built along the lake and now contains a very expensive hotel (previously the palace) as well as the residence of the current Maharajah and a small branch of Anokhi and some expensive restaurants and coffee shops which we avoided. The old palace and museum are both open to the public and well-worth visiting. You end up in a beautiful large treed courtyard right at the top of the palace and realise that you are actually on the top of the hill and that the palace has been built over the hill. It is a major tourist centre so there are lots and lots of shops selling silver, jewellery, pashminas, miniature paintings and all the usual things that we saw everywhere else.



Udaipur, view from Monsoon Palace



Udaipur, view across ghat





Palace at Udaipur



Holy man, Udaipur



Boat on Ghat, Udaipur



Bathing and washing in ghat, Udaipur

But we had a delicious dinner at a thali restaurant (a Rajasthan vegetarian speciality where they bring you a round metal tray with lots of little dishes containing things like dal, potato, brinjal, served with naan and rice and as much as you could eat – they kept offering to fill your little dishes – for about R20 per head) recommended by our driver which was away from the lake and out of the main tourist area.



As we had three nights in Udaipur we decided to go for a ride in the surrounding countryside. We rode beautiful Marwari horses. They have ears that almost meet at the top forming a crescent and which can swivel almost 360 degrees – if you say something their ears turn towards you – like radar! It was great to get out into the countryside and we rode past small farms with really simple homes – as it was winter and dry there wasn't much evidence of crops and we really wondered how the people survived in such a harsh landscape

We also drove up to the Monsoon Palace which has a spectacular view over Udaipur and the lakes and the surrounding countryside. The road up to the palace is also quite an experience as it comprises a large number of hairpin bends and switchbacks. It is situated in a small national park, again in an area that was previously a maharajahs hunting area and we watched a pair of mongooses come in to drink at a small pond and, cup of chai in hand, watched the sunset over the Aravalli Mountains.

Leaving Udaipur both sides of the road were lined for at least 100 km with marble (mainly white but occasionally green or pink). It lay cut and stacked waiting for sale at hundreds of marble selling yards or in enormous blocks on lumbering trucks which our Pradeep sped past! The landscape must have changed enormously for there to have been so much marble removed and most places we stayed in (and we were mainly staying in comfortable but not upmarket accommodation) had marble floors as they were clearly the least expensive and most available option.

Jaipur, also known as the Red City as all the buildings are painted a glowing russet red, is home to the extraordinary Hawa Mawa – a tall narrow building about six storeys high and one room deep running parallel to the road. It was designed so that the women in Purdah could watch events in the street below. There was a snake charmer plying his trade for the tourists and one very pale English tourist got rather more than he bargained for and had to do a giant leap sideways when the cobra decided to lunge sideways at him – they are meant to have their fangs and venom sacs removed but....who knows?

The Amber Fort, situated on the top of a hill out of Jaipur, was really imposing. We opted to do the tourist thing and go up by elephant. We thought it may have been a way of escaping the vendors but they ran alongside while you were captive, insisted on taking your photograph and being extremely trying! They had restored part of the huge wooden waterwheel system that was used to bring water from the lake at the bottom of the hill to the chambers at the top of the palace. Originally there were several of them each bringing water up a level from which the next one would lift it using a bucket system to the next level and so on up. They had hot water systems and flushing toilets!



One of the gates into the Old City of Jaipur



Snake charmers outside the Hawa Mawa, Jaipur



Hawa Mawa, Jaipur



The Amber Fort, Jaipur



Inside the Amber Fort, Jaipur



Elephants lined up waiting for passengers, Amber Fort, Jaipur



Cermonail cow and cart, Jaipur



Decorated Camel, Jaipur

The Jantar Mantar, was a real highlight of the trip. We had seen it described as one of his eighty treasures by Dan Cruikshank in his BBC series "Around the World in 80 Treasures". It was built as an astronomical observatory by Maharajah Sawai Jai Singh in the early 1700's and contained a number of the most exquisitely sculptural buildings housing various measuring instruments whose function included (among others) telling the time, measuring celestial latitude and longitude, plus various astrological functions. Beautiful and extraordinary.



Jantar Mantar, (Astronomical Observatory) Jaipur

The Anokhi stores are worth seeking out if you are in India – one of the best is in Jaipur and we did manage to visit it. For the last 30 years Anokhi have been promoting traditional Jaipur handblock printed fabrics. Traditional designs are carved onto wooden blocks and handprinted onto cotton or silk fabrics which are then made up into garments - Indian and Western in design - home textiles, sarongs and accessories. The company has a strong ethos of social responsibility and sustainability and we regretted that we didn't have time to visit their block printing museum on their farm near Jaipur. The shop had a café which served delicious sandwiches and salads from vegetables grown organically on their farm – we hadn't realised how much we craved salad and these were particularly good. Pradeep, our driver, was not so impressed – said the tea on the street was much better!

Pushkar is famous for its camel festival and its holy ghats. The camel festival was over and the town was relatively quiet. Our hotel the once splendid Pushkar Palace, with its colonial verandas and photos of maharajahs hunting parties was looking a little tired and in need of refurbishment as was the town itself.



The hotel was situated on the ghats where pilgrims come to bathe and cleanse themselves. There are numerous signs about not taking photographs of the bathing pilgrims and when you walk near the ghats you are plagued by “holy” men who try to press petals into your hands which you are supposed to cast into the waters to bring you good fortune... a donation is required. The water in the ghat was fetid and bubbling with all sorts of unmentionable things floating on the surface (again being pushed aside by bathers).



Scenes from Pushkar

But what was fascinating was that ghat was being dredged (obviously silted up over the years) and they had built an earth retaining wall across the middle so they drain a portion of the ghat and remove the silt. There were enormous barbel stranded in the thick muddy water and two young men were stripped to their underpants and slithering around in the mud catching the barbel in cloths and sacks. Once one was captured, they carried it, slippery and threshing, up the earth bank and deposited it in the water on the other side.





Rescuing barbel from the ghat, Pushkar

This was a manifestation of the regard for any form of life that we found everywhere we travelled in India. People put out food and water for animals and birds and even though we knew that India had almost 1300 bird species (we had copies of Birds of the Indian Subcontinent with us!). We weren't expecting to see the quantities of birds that we saw everywhere. Even rats are protected and fed in one temple and Hindu families avoid cats because they kill rats and mice.

We stopped with amazement at a pan / small dam near the road outside Jodhpur because of the enormous number of Egyptian vultures that were sitting on the ground or perched in trees around it. There were also large numbers of Steppe eagles. One of our first surprises on reaching Delhi tomb was the number of birds – thousands of kites and mynahs (there are seven different types of mynah in India) and in the park surrounding Humayan's Tomb, we already started our bird-watching seeing barbets and hoopoes and starlings and woodpeckers.



A ubiquitous Treepie, Ranthambhore National Park

Ducks, Keoladeo Ghana National Park (Bharatpur)

When we were at Ranakpur we caught a glimpse of a bird that we tentatively and excitedly identified as a Treepie (pronounced tree pie as in magpie) and tried unsuccessfully to get a good look at. Needless to say, by the time we reached Ranthambhore we literally had them eating out of our hands and they are even more numerous than Grey Loeries in Joburg but large, pushy and beautiful and always worth admiring! But the joy of seeing a new bird should never be discounted! The other place where we saw extraordinary concentrations of birds was Keoladeo Ghana National Park. This is a small park, only 29 square kilometres of which 11 sq km is swamp/marsh. While many of India's parks have been developed from the hunting preserves of princely India, Keoladeo, popularly known as Bharatpur Wildlife Sanctuary, is perhaps the only case where the habitat has been created by a maharaja. In 1760, an earthen dam was constructed, to protect the Bharatpur from flooding by the annual monsoon. The depression created by extraction of soil for the dam became the Bharatpur Lake. In the early 1900s a system of small dams, dykes, sluice gates, etc.,

was created to control water levels in different sections and became the hunting preserve of the Bharatpur royalty, and one of the best duck-shooting wetlands in the world. Hunting was prohibited by mid-60s. The area was declared a national park on 10 March 1982, and accepted as a World Heritage Site in December 1985.

Not realising how amazing Keoladeo was (no excuse as we are all bird-watchers), we only had ONE night there so had to try to cover most of the park in about six hours. We were lucky enough to get Bajendra Singh as our guide following recommendations from a Danish couple we met at Ranthambhore. He has been at Keoladeo for over 30 years and has worked with most of the world's top ornithologists – we only managed to retain him as a result of cancellations (thank you Mumbai). He showed us thousands of breeding Painted Storks (look like their backsides have been dipped in shocking pink paint). In one area it looked like the entire lake was covered in water-lilies. These turned out to be thousands upon thousands of ducks (see photo above) who took off in great swirling dark clouds, their wings making the most extraordinary sound like a whirring, whooshing wind – I thought I was hearing a train! Then we were lucky enough to see three endangered Sarus Cranes – huge birds 1.6 metres tall with bright red heads and legs – just spectacular! We stayed at the Birder's Inn at Bharatpur and were expecting pretty basic accommodation in keeping with normal birding places but it turned out to be some of the more superior accommodation we stayed in - gardens and trees always make such a difference.

We spent three nights at Ranthambhore National Park where we were fortunate enough to be guided by Vipul Jain. He is widely acknowledged in *Tigers in Red Weather* by Ruth Padel which is her story of the immense pressure under which tigers in the wild exist – mainly from poachers who are after their skins, claws, teeth, sexual organs for medicine – all for sale at huge prices in China and smuggled out across the borders. Vipul was a warm and generous man who took us to his home to meet his family and guided us into the Park.



Fort in Ranthambhore National Park



Ficus tree, Ranthambhore National Park



Step well (found all over Rajasthan)

However, Indian Parks operate under their own complex and (to us) bizarre rules. In Ranthambhore entrance is only permitted in jeeps (6 -8 seater open Suzuki Maruti jeeps) and Canters (trucks which seat around 20 people) and you usually have no control of which vehicle or guide you go with. The park is divided into 5 sections into which 5 Jeeps and 4 Canters are permitted at any one time and that is between 7 and 10 in the morning and 3 and 6 in the afternoon. Yes... the park is closed to the public between 10 and 3 (or most of the prime viewing time of each day!). Also, there is no accommodation inside the park and all visitors have to travel in daily. Around 70% of visitors are Indian and there appears to be one objective... see a tiger! The guides and drivers tips depend upon it and there is no doubt that the practice of limiting the amount of time that people can spend in the park only encourages this tiger-focused frenzy.

In order to get us our own Jeep for our three excursions into the Park, Vipul had booked it four months previously when we had made our initial reservation with him. We did see tigers on our first excursion into Ranthambhore – it was in the late afternoon. Since the guides and drivers communicate sightings by making the call of the Chital (spotted) deer, we arrived at the site in the company of 4 Canters and 4 other Jeeps. Thanks to Vipul we were able to get close enough to have a good look at a young male tiger lying in the grass below a tree and then at the mother and her two youngsters running off. And yes... it is a wonderful experience! First, unlike lions which lie around in groups under trees looking photogenic, tigers (although even more photogenic) are much less obliging. It is said that you only see leopards if they want you to. Well with tigers it is even more difficult and given their rapidly diminishing numbers one really is privileged to see a tiger in the wild. And they are exquisitely beautiful and huge.



Tiger, Ranthambhore National Park



Sambal Deer, Ranthambhore National Park



Chittal deer, Ranthambhore National Park



Wild Boar, Ranthambhore National Park

We didn't see tigers again in Ranthambhore but it really didn't concern us. The park was beautiful with enormous trees, lots of birds and large herds of deer (Chital or spotted and Sambar deer) and even some wild boar who have outrageous punk haircuts! During the day when the park was closed Vipul took us into the adjacent farmlands to try to see the elusive Blue Buck which live in the community agricultural areas and not in the park. They are considered sacred and protected by the villagers. The whole area, as far as you could see in any direction, was a blaze of bright yellow. The mustard (harvested for its seed and oil) was in flower and dotted around within the fields the women in just as brightly coloured saris were watering and weeding the crops. I did wonder about the extent to which mustard has become such a pervasive crop – it seems that this is a relatively new occurrence and this form of mono-culture must have had some implications on traditional crops and ways of planting. A visit to some local homes was also a highlight. The homes were beautifully kept, very simple with outside hearths for cooking, grinding stones crushing spices and rollers for roti. There were no women in evidence as they were all tending their crops. Goats, cows and camels all lived in close proximity to their owners and were invariably adorned with

necklaces, bells and baubles and camels were either shaven in patterns or painted with henna in simple geometric designs.



Rural scenes outside Ranthambhore National Park



And yes.. the Taj is sublime. Even at mid-day which was the only time it fitted into our schedule and despite the fact that all the guidebooks gush on about dusk or dawn. I'm sure it adds to the extraordinary experience but that really would be the cherry on top of the icing on the cake. The Taj is just such an icon that you expect the extraordinary but even so it is truly, tear-jerkingly beautiful and I suspect that one's first glimpse of the real thing has to be one of the more memorable occasions in one's life.

Our Taj day was really full! We left Keoladeo at about 10 after trying to squeeze in some last minute birding and drove through to Fatipah Sikhri about an hour away. This was built by Emperor Akbar in the 1500s as his new palace and fort. It took around 18 years to complete and was only inhabited for around 14 years before it ran out of water and was abandoned. It remained in excellent condition in the dry climate and even the Mughal gardens have been beautifully restored. We saw the palace built by Muslim Akbar for his Hindu wife Jodhaa. (If you haven't seen the absolutely sumptuous, breath-takingly beautiful, wildly romantic, four-hour long, Bollywood epic, Jodhaa Akbar, give yourself a treat... hire the DVD and bliss-out!). Akbar married Jodhaa, a Hindu Rajput princess with the objective of bringing Rajasthan into his empire. She provided him with a son (the father of Shah Jehan who built the Taj) and was his favourite so had the biggest and most spectacular palace. He also had a Christian and a Muslim wife who also had their own

(lesser) palaces. Fatephur Sikhri should not be missed but as mentioned earlier, has the worst and most pushy vendors and touts that we encountered.

We left Agra at around 4 in the afternoon, bound for Old Delhi Station from where we were to catch our train to Corbett National Park. This was probably the most hairy, scary drive we experienced in India as we ended up driving in the dark. The road appeared to be an excellent double highway but .. this was India so, shops, eateries, truck stops were accessed directly from it (no off-ramps) and the road users included camel carts, tractors almost concealed beneath huge loads of hay, bicycles, motor-bikes, trucks and buses plus cows, goats, dogs and pedestrians. Also, vehicles in India seem to believe that it is wasteful to put on their lights and nothing appeared to have any rear lights. We had great admiration for our excellent driver who managed (by a miracle) to avoid a bus which pulled out directly in our path from the side of the road and who we missed by too narrow a margin to think about!

We were met at Ramnagar Station by Ramesh Suyal who was to be our guide and travel organiser for the next stage of our trip – Jim Corbett National Park. It was cold and misty and we soon pulled over at a roadside chai store. As we drank our delicious chai, we watched a man bathing in the canal next to the road and the tea cups being rinsed in the same water for future customers! Ramesh was a small enthusiastic man with the most beautiful face and smile whose passion for and knowledge about wildlife and the environment was almost tangible. He made our travel arrangements to Corbett from Keoladeo and organised our accommodation inside and outside the Park. Corbett is the only national park where it is possible to stay in government accommodation inside the park. It is a big park and it would not be possible to cover the ground otherwise. Corbett operates under a slightly different system: firstly a limited number of private vehicles are permitted to enter each day as are a limited number of Jeeps and Canters. The same time system prevails as at Ranthambhore except that you can go in for the whole day. BUT, if you went in the morning you can't exit between 10 and 3 as the gates are closed! We spent our first night at the Dhikgala government rest house. This was about a four hour drive from the gate and overlooked a huge lake filled with water birds.

The accommodation looked like concrete blockhouses. It was cold and damp the day we arrived and the rooms were colder inside than outside. Everything felt cold and damp, including the bedding (the top duvet was thick, damp and leaden and bed was very uninviting!). However, the food in the canteen was good and the next morning we were booked on an elephant ride to look for tigers. I went rather reluctantly as I hadn't enjoyed the ride up to the Amber Fort at Jaipur but this was a rather different experience. There were four of us on the elephant plus the mahout and we set out in the early morning as the sun rose without any great expectations of seeing a tiger. The scenery was beautiful as we skirted the forest and went down towards the river. We had just crossed the river when we spotted a tiger. We set off after it through the long grass and back across the river. It wound its way through the long grass and reeds and we lost sight of it for a short while before we saw it crossing the river and vanishing into the forest on the other side. All we managed was a fuzzy blur as the camera was on the wrong setting and there isn't much time to sort things out when pursuing a tiger on a rocking elephant! We then re-crossed the river as the mahout had spotted signs of drag marks. We followed the marks and as we came upon the kill (a large male sambar deer which the tiger had been eating before we disturbed him) our elephant decided to have a little freak out and spun around in circles trumpeting and then rushed off up the bank towards the second elephant who was with us at the sighting. To our consternation the mahout was bashing her on the head with a sharp spike but this effectively brought her back under control and back to the kill. The two elephants then stood next to each other with their trunks entwined, maybe comforting each other and making a series of low rumbling noises.

Well, if we thought Dhikala was dodgy, Birjani the next night's government guest house was seriously challenging. The building had obviously only just been completed and there was still building rubble and litter all around. The architectural style was slightly improved and the rooms were not as damp. But, supplies of furniture and bed linen had clearly not arrived yet and the staff was attempting to make do. Bonnie and Russel discovered that the sheets on their bed had been VERY well used by one or more very active couples and there was only one clean sheet available to replace the bottom sheet but no clean covers for the duvet. The mattress was indescribably soiled and there was no hot water (solar heaters do not work in cold, misty conditions!). Our sheet (for which there was no replacement) was slightly grimy and

barely covered a new, plastic clad mattress. We had learned the value of kikoys while staying in some somewhat suspect accommodation in Vietnam but this was something else!

The problem was that you needed to stay in the government guest houses in order to appreciate the parks but they were so bad that they tended to cloud your memories of the park which was really beautiful. There were forested hills plunging down to boulder strewn rivers with that slightly cloudy ice blue water. There were extensive marshy, grassland areas. From one viewpoint we saw a huge crocodile attempting to sun himself on a bank accompanied by an even more enormous gharial (a rather endangered croc with a long thin snout adapted for hunting fish). We saw two herds of wild elephants (about 30 elephants in total) with lots of babies and adolescents. We saw a pair of martens (related to stouts) bounding across the rocky landscape. We saw lots of birds including a maroon oriole. Although we were delighted to see tigers in Corbett, we were equally interested in seeing other wildlife, especially birds. There is no doubt that one's experience and appreciation of a new wilderness area is heightened by the privilege of having a good and sensitive specialist guide.



Marten, Corbett National Park



Gharial, Corbett National Park



Elephant safari, Corbett National Park



Wild elephants, Corbett National Park



Our guide, Ramesh Suyal, Corbett National Park



Langur monkey, Corbett National Park



Tiger-viewing, Corbett National Park

But, Ramesh was right when he advised that we would need somewhere really comfortable to stay in order to recover from the guest houses. And the contrast couldn't have been more extreme. We spent our next two nights at the somewhat tweely named Corbett's Hideaway. This was hardly a hideaway as it was a fairly big resort with lots of clustered units set in a large garden (a Mount Grace type model but not as glamorous). It had a grill room, lots of noisy evening entertainment for the young (including disco and ...wait for it... BINGO!). It also had a restaurant serving excellent buffet-style meals that was part of the tariff and which had a lovely terrace overlooking the river which was great for afternoon tea when we returned from the Park. In fact it was so comfortable that it was tempting to remain there the next day instead of setting off in the jeep for the Park at 6.30 on a very cold, foggy day.



The fog didn't lift and we got colder and colder and even though we saw some birds and the martens, we decided to leave the Park by 3.00 and were having a warming cup of chai when there was a report of a tiger close by. We said to a dumbfounded Ramesh that it was OK, we would rather go!!! Well he wasn't letting us get away with that so off we went to join (I KID YOU NOT) 27 jeeps all parked along a dead-end road about a kilometre away.

So we entered the fray and parked at the base of a steepish well-wooded bank about 3 metres high and were assured that the tiger was behind a tree at the top of the bank. Well after a few minutes an ENORMOUS head raised itself, viewed the seething masses beneath and lay down again. After a few more minutes we said, OK – doubt we'll see more of him so let's go. Much manoeuvring as we have to get through the traffic and then turn around and come back. It really is mayhem – there are Jeeps backing into each other, getting their bumpers locked. There are people standing on the roll bars, there are people running between vehicles and everyone is talking excitedly and at the tops of their voices. We worked out that there were at least 250 people at the scene and believe it or not India has similar game drive rules to SA (remaining seated, keeping quiet and DEFINITELY not getting out of your vehicle). Anyway as we made our way back through the melee the tiger decided "enough already". It jumped up, roared (indescribably, heart-stoppingly, loudly) and charged along the ridge parallel to the road about 3 metres away from us and

straight at the jeeps ahead. Finding its route across the road so overwhelmingly blocked, it stopped, roared again, turned and vanished back into the bush. The crowd (us included) was initially stunned and then the cacophony that broke out as everyone told everyone else what happened was something to behold. Once again, we had the wrong setting on the camera (wasn't expecting the tiger to be so close, so... yet more fuzzy orange blurs). However, we did get some shots of the audience which was almost as good!



Tiger watchers, Corbett National Park



The Tiger!

We decided that our tiger viewing had reached its climax and opted not to spend the whole of the next day in the park – it would have meant going in by 7 and not coming out again until 3 and we had heard there were interesting things to see in the surrounding area. So we walked along the river to look for Ibis Bills and Dippers and then up into the hills. We were lucky enough to see wall-creepers (birds) – flashes of crimson wings as they flitted amongst the grey boulders on the river bank.

On our final evening we had dinner Ramesh and his family before being escorted by the entire team to the station to catch our overnight train to back to Delhi. He and his younger brother Mohan had started this business with Ramesh doing most of the guiding and Mohan running the business side: reservations, hotel bookings, vehicles, drivers etc. They offer a really good service and Ramesh was a truly outstanding guide who understood that everyone has different interests and he went out of his way to make our Corbett experience rich, varied and rewarding.

The train journey to Delhi went smoothly – even though this time we were in three-tier sleeper air conditioned (no curtains). We arrived in Delhi early in the morning and there outside our window was the smiling face of Pradeep – he and Deepa had been dispatched to pick us up, deliver us to a nearby hotel to shower and have breakfast before delivering us to Delhi airport and to pick up some luggage from Emirates 22 days after we arrived in India!



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