

TRACKS SAFARIS

WE GET YOU CLOSER



14 NIGHT THE LAST LIONS OF ASIA

Mumbai – Gir – Velavadar – Dasada – Jawai – Jaipur – Ranthambhore – Delhi



Image: The Asiatic Lion



If you take a close look at the emblem of India it does not have the tiger - instead has lions on it. Not many realise that the lions once ruled the vast deciduous forests and scrub forests of Gujarat. These lions are very different from their cousins found in Africa. They once roamed through Gujarat and parts of Punjab now in Pakistan and some experts say they could even be found in Afghanistan. However, their population in the last 100 years has been decimated leaving the Gir forests of India as the last bastion for this wonderful species.

This itinerary has been planned to showcase some unique wildlife of the country that not many are aware inhabit this vast and diverse landscape. Other interesting species that we shall be focusing on during in this adventure is the Indian Grey Wolf, the Striped Hyena, the endemic Bengal Fox, Desert Cat, Blackbuck antelope and the Asiatic Wild Ass. The savanna-like grasslands are also home to the largest roost of Harriers in the world – comprising largely of Pallid Harrier, Montague Harrier and the Marsh Harrier. Whereas scrublands around the salt pans of Kutch are home to Flamingos, Pelicans, Common Cranes, Red headed Falcon, Short-eared Owl, Indian Courser, Sociable Lapwing, a variety of Pratincoles and the McQueen's Bustard.

This adventure not only showcases Gujarat but also allows you to explore some wilderness regions of Rajasthan as well. During this program you should seek the following wildlife:

Mammals: Lion, Tiger, Leopard, Caracal, Jungle Cat, Rusty-spotted Cat, Sloth Bear, Indian Grey Wolf, Striped Hyena, Golden Jackal, Indian Fox, Indian Wild Ass, Nilgai Antelope, Indian Gazelle, Blackbuck Antelope, Spotted Deer, Sambar Deer, Rhesus Macaque and the Northern Plains Langur.

Birds: Flamingos, Great White Pelicans, Common Cranes, Asian Openbill storks, Painted Storks, Red-naped Ibis, Black-headed White Ibis, Red-necked Falcon, Peregrine Falcon, Common Kestrel, Montague Harrier, Pallid Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Crested Serpent Eagle and a variety of Kingfishers to name a few.



DAY ONE

Arrive into Mumbai. On arrival we shall book the airport hotel at Mumbai airport so that you can get some rest. This afternoon catch your flight to Diu. On arrival at Diu you will be met by our office representative who shall introduce you to your driver for this trip. Transfer by road from Diu airport to Gir National Park.

Recommended Optional Excursion: A short excursion to Naida Caves in Diu might be more interesting to photographers. The Portuguese ruled over Diu for many years. They broke down sections of a huge rock formation, that they used for construction of the Diu Fort. The Naida Caves are located just outside the city wall of the fort. This is how the caves got shape eventually. However, it is also studied that the caves were formed due to geological irregularities and processes over a significant amount of time.

It is locally said that in the 20th century, when the Portuguese were adamant about not leaving Diu, and operation Vijay was launched to seize control by the Indian Army, several soldiers were stationed at the Naida caves. These caves have a natural opening that allows sunlight to enter the caves, making it all the more photogenic. The excursion to these caves should not take more than 30min – an hour.

Continue your road journey to Gir. The drive should take about 2.5hrs. Remainder of the evening is at leisure.

Overnight will be at Woods at Sasan on a full board basis

DAYS TWO AND THREE

These two days are spent exploring Gir National Park. Gir National Park was set up in 1965 and a 259-sq km core area was declared a national park in 1975. Since the late 1960s lion numbers have increased from under 200 to over 650 (not all these lions live within the park). The sanctuary's 37 other mammal species, most of which have also increased in numbers, include dainty chitals (spotted deer), sambars (large deer), nilgais (large antelopes), chousinghas (four-horned antelopes), chinkaras (gazelles), crocodiles and rarely seen leopards. The park is a great destination for birders, too, with more than 300 species, most of them resident.

Unlike other parks in the country Gir offers 3 safari excursions into the park per day for tourists – Early morning 0600 – 0900, 0930 – 1200 & 1500 – 1730. Please note timings of the park changes each month depending on sunrise and sunset time so there may be a variance of 15-30 minutes.

We have planned 2 safaris on each of the two days – early morning & afternoon safari. The safari will be in an exclusive jeep.

Overnight will be at Woods at Sasan on a full board basis



DAY FOUR

This morning you take your last game drive into Gir. After an early lunch check-out and transfer by road to Velavadar. The journey to Velavadar should take about 4 hours.

The Blackbuck Sanctuary is a hidden gem, one of the last stands of grassland remaining in the massive alluvial plain running along the Gulf of Khambhat called Bhal. The Bhal is a tapestry of cotton, wheat and other agricultural fields, saline flats, grasslands, pastures, freshwater wetlands and coastal marshes. Nearly forty species of grasses have been identified from Bhal. The dominant grass species are *Dicanthium annulatum*, *Sporobolus virginicus*, *S. coromandelianus* and *S. maderaspatensis*.

The national park is a beautiful 35sq km tract of largely treeless Savannah grasslands and bushes that makes a stunning and enchanting sight. It is wonderful to watch the grasslands changing colour at different times of the day, and also in different seasons of the year, from bright gleaming greens to golden browns, and the grasses swaying in gentle breezes. The beauty of the grassland is enhanced by its abundance of wildlife from butterflies and dragonflies to India's largest antelope, the nilgai. Some of the largest herds of Blackbuck antelope can be found here.

The key predator of Velavadar is the Indian wolf, an endangered species. Indian wolves generally hunt in pairs or small packs, with one of them distracting the antelopes while the other takes one from a group by surprise. In open country they may give a sustained chase to their prey. Velavadar is also one of the most likely places to view a striped hyena, a species that is rarely seen elsewhere because of its nocturnal habits. This evening is at leisure. Should you feel up to it do explore the lodge grounds as these grasslands are contiguous to the adjoining park and be rest assured that there is plenty of wildlife to be seen on lodge grounds itself.

Overnight will be at Blackbuck Lodge on a full board basis



DAYS FIVE AND SIX

We have planned two safaris each day in the Blackbuck Sanctuary.

The grasslands of Velavadar offer close viewing of various species of larks, quails, painted and grey francolin, shrikes, wheatears, sparrow larks and other characteristic birds of the bush. The globally threatened Stolickza's bush chat is one of the specialties of this national park. The tall and striking-looking saras crane is a subcontinent endemic that is seen in flooded grassland areas of the park, while flocks of demoiselle and common cranes gather in winter at the wetlands. River and riverside birds can be watched at the Porvalia and Alang Rivers that run alongside the park to its north and south respectively, and some of these sites can be prolific for watching flocks of sandgrouse coming to drink.

Velavadar is also well-known for its concentration of raptors. Short-toed eagles are often seen, while Aquila eagles like imperial, greater spotted and steppe could also be seen at Velavadar in winter. Other raptors often seen are kestrel, laggar falcon, black-shoulder kite and shikra.

The most spectacular sight is the winter roost of harriers, mostly Montagu's and pallid but also marsh and the occasional hen – thousands of them have been seen settling down to roost among the grasslands on a winter evening. This is widely rated as the world's largest harrier roost. Eurasian eagle owl hunts here and could be seen even in daylight.

Overnight will be at Blackbuck Lodge on a full board basis

DAY SEVEN

After an early breakfast you depart for the Little Rann of Kutch to explore the Wild Ass Sanctuary and the surrounding region. The journey to Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) should take about 4.5 - 5hrs. You should arrive by lunchtime and settle in before beginning to explore the park this afternoon.

The Rann of Kutch is a geographically unique landscape that was once an arm of the Arabian Sea. As the land separated from the sea by geological forces, it became a vast, featureless plain encrusted with salt that is inundated with water during the rains.



The safari across the Little Rann visits the 'bets', islands on the ancient seabed that are now higher grounds covered with grass and scrub. These 'bets' support a variety of wildlife including the 'Gudkhur' (Asiatic wild ass) that is not found elsewhere. The wild ass is a handsome chestnut brown member of the equus genus (horse family). Capable of reaching high speeds when galloping across the Rann, the wild ass is usually seen in small herds.

The elegant blackbuck (Indian antelope), nilgai or blue bull (India's largest antelope) and the graceful chinkara (Indian gazelle) are other mammals seen at the bets. The main carnivores of the Little Rann of Kutch are the endangered Indian wolf, desert fox, Indian fox, jackals, desert and jungle cats, and a few hyenas. Smaller mammals like hares, gerbilles and hedgehogs, and reptiles like spiny tailed lizard, monitor, red and common sand boa, saw-scaled viper, cobra, Dhaman (Indian rat snake), etc, could also be seen during the safaris in the Rann.

Overnight will be at Rann Riders Lodge on a full board basis

DAYS EIGHT AND NINE

Continue exploring the Little Rann of Kutch. The Little Rann of Kutch is also a birding paradise and has been declared a Ramsar Site. During the safaris in the Rann expect to see large flocks of larks, and other dryland birds like sandgrouse, coursers, plovers, chats, warblers, babblers, shrikes. Among the many winter visitors are the houbara bustard and spotted sandgrouse.

The best birding is at the lakes and marshes in and around the Rann where birds gather in numbers beyond comprehension during the winter months from October to March. These are the months when demoiselle and common cranes are seen in incredibly large numbers. The wetlands also attract flamingos, pelicans, storks, ibises, spoonbill, a variety of ducks and other waterfowl.

The Rann is also the hunting ground of raptors like the short-toed eagle, Aquila eagles, six species of falcon, buzzards and three species of harrier. It is one of the few places where harriers can be seen roosting on open ground at night.



Spend the days exploring the sanctuary and the surrounding area.

Overnight will be at Rann Riders Lodge on a full board basis

DAY TEN

This morning after breakfast you make your way to Jawai. Your drive to Jawai should take about 5.5hrs. It is ideal to start early so that you reach Bera Safari Lodge by lunchtime.

Rajasthan has been the abode of many birds and mammals. Many efforts have been put in to conserve the flora and fauna of this desert state of India. One of them - Jawai Conservation Reserve was established in the year 2013. This project was proposed to promote ecotourism and safeguard the wellbeing of flora and Fauna in this area.

Ancient Rocks of the pre-Cambrian period represents Bera in the Aravalli Range which runs diagonally across the state. The southern part of the range is formed by granite and rise to their highest summit Mt Abu.

Bera Region lies between Kumbalgarh National Park and Mt Abu Sanctuary and the area has granite hills. These large granite formation are scattered with Anogeissus scrub, and rocky dry river beds and kopjes are scattered with religious shrines and temples. The leopards of Bera have accepted these as a part of their habitat and it is the most incredible sight to see villagers at prayer and leopards sitting quite Indian Leopard calmly and watching the ceremonies.

Traditionally the area was maintained for grazing livestock and farming, with the creation of watering holes and feeding stations for wildlife. A healthy population of 50+ Leopards live in the Bera/Jawai Region and it is one of the few places on earth where among human settlements leopards thrive. The area is Inhabited by Rabari Tribe (The Shepherds/Herdsman) and where there is prey predators follow.

Some of the other animals found in the area are - Caracal (Rare sight), Chinkara, Desert Cat, Indian Wolf, Sloth Bear, Pythons, Jackal, Jungle Cat, Striped Hyena, and the Blue Bulls.



Late this afternoon take your first safari in search of the leopard.

Overnight will be at Bera Safari Lodge on a full board basis

DAY ELEVEN

You continue exploring Bera and Jawai Dam region in search of the various species that call it home. During the day you can visit the villages and learn about the Rabari tribes.

Overnight will be at Bera Safari Lodge on a full board basis

DAY TWELVE

Early this morning make your way to Udaipur airport which is approximately 2.5 hours by road. On arrival you are met and assisted to check in for your flight to Jaipur. On arrival our representative will receive you at the airport and you will break for lunch before you begin your journey to Ranthambhore which is approximately 3.5 hours by road.

Overnight will be at Khem Vilas on a full board basis

DAYS THIRTEEN AND FOURTEEN

You begin exploring Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve and will be doing two safaris on each of these two days. Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve is perhaps the most popular tiger reserve in the country. The wildcats here are quite used to seeing the tourist vehicle and are not as shy as in many other parks.

The exact origin of the Ranthambore fort is still disputed but it is generally accepted that there was a settlement at the site of the Fort as far back as the 8th century A.D. It is widely believed that the construction of the Ranthambhore Fort was started during the reign of the Chauhan Rajput King Sapaldaksha in 944 AD. Another theory stipulates that King Jayant, also a Chauhan Rajput, built the Ranthambore Fort during 1110

AD. It is most likely that the construction of the fort commenced during the mid-10th Century A.D. and continued for a few centuries after that.

Since, the Ranthambhore Fort controlled the trade routes between North India and Central India it was highly coveted by the rulers of North India. The Ranthambore Fort had its golden moments during the reign of the king Rao Hammir, the last ruler of the Chauhan dynasty (1282 - 1301 AD).

During 1300 AD, Ala-ud-din Khilji - the ruler of Delhi - sent his army to capture the Fort. After three unsuccessful attempts his army finally conquered the Ranthambhore Fort in 1301 and ended the reign of the Chauhans. In the next three centuries the Ranthambore Fort changed hands a number of times until Akbar, the great Mughal emperor, finally took over the Fort and dissolved the State of Ranthambore in 1558. The fort stayed in the possession of the Mughal rulers till the mid 18th century.



During the mid 18th century, the Maratha rulers of Western India were gradually increasing their influence in this region. In order to check the growing influence of the Marathas, Sawai Madho Singh, the ruler of Jaipur state unsuccessfully requested the Mughal emperor to hand over the Ranthambhore fort to him. In 1763, Sawai Madho Singh fortified the nearby village of Sherpur and renamed it Sawai Madhopur. This town, which is now commonly known as the "Sawai Madhopur City", lies in a narrow valley between two parallel hills, at the South Western edge of the Ranthambhore National Park. Two years later, the Mughals handed over the fort to the Jaipur state.

During the end of the British Raj Sawai Man Singh, the last ruler of Jaipur state, got a railway link constructed between Jaipur and Sawai Madhopur. A railway station was built about 4 kilometres away from the Sawai Madhopur town. Gradually a small settlement came up around the railway station. This twin of Sawai Madhopur, known as "Man Town" has now outgrown the older "City".

Overnight will be at Khem Vilas on a full board basis

DAY FIFTEEN

This morning take your last safari into Ranthambhore. On return and after breakfast at the lodge check-out and transfer to Jaipur airport which is approximately 3 hours by road. On arrival you will be met and assisted to check in for your flight to Delhi and onward flight back home.



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