

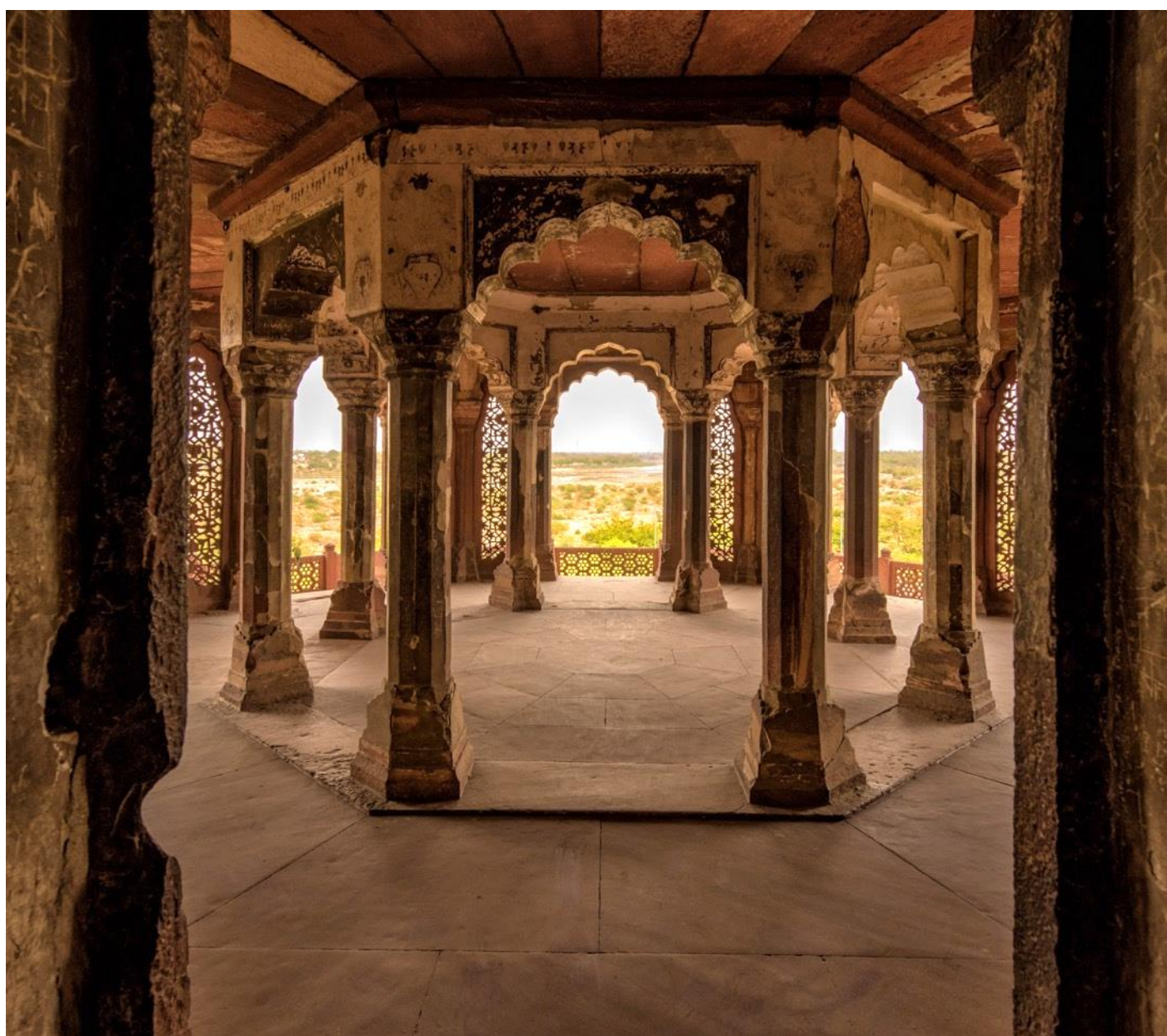
TRACKS SAFARIS

WE GET YOU CLOSER



16 NIGHT TIGERS AND FORTS OF CENTRAL INDIA & THE TAJ

Delhi – Maheshwar – Pench – Satpura – Bhopal – Agra – Chambal – Delhi





AN INTRODUCTION

Madhya Pradesh is the true centre and heartland of India. Its forests were made famous by Rudyard Kipling and many have subsequently been turned into National Parks in order to preserve their unique, rich and varied wildlife. Its better known parks of Pench, Kanha and Bandhavgarh protect tiger, leopard, wild dog, gaur (Indian Bison), monkey and deer as well as many reptiles and birds, though not to be missed are the relatively recently discovered parks (in terms of tourism at least) of Panna and Satpura.

Part of the beauty of Madhya Pradesh is its lack of infrastructure, meaning that this is, one of India's most enchanting states, remains virtually unspoilt by mass tourism. Its sites are treasures which are varied and captivating. Close to Bhopal are the two UNESCO world heritage sites of Sanchi and Bhimbetka and Maheshwar on the banks of the Narmada River is a hidden gem with a glorious, quirky palace hotel, Ahilya Fort, and close enough to be able to visit the holy town of Omkareshwar and the deserted monuments at Mandu.

However, although the roads in Madhya Pradesh are not in the widest, there doesn't tend to be as much traffic and the drives are quite scenic. One of the things we love about this state is that much of it really does seem like the rest of India used to be one hundred years ago and when driving between destinations one is privileged to witness this. Drives go through forested areas, and past villages where most of the population still live in mud and thatch houses which they repaint every year, after the monsoon, in a vivid indigo blue. During November when the mustard crops are ready the brilliance of the yellow against the blue houses is wonderfully eye catching. Madhya Pradesh changes with the season, its population is largely unaffected by tourism and by and large one can be at sites as impressive as the ones seen in Rajasthan, but without the crowding. One of our favourite tips, sundowners whilst enjoying the sunsets on the Narmada River are not to be missed.



DAY ONE

On arrival into Delhi International Airport our representative shall meet you as you exit the arrival hall and you will be transferred to your hotel. Depending on what time you arrive we can modify how your day is planned in Delhi -if you are arriving in the morning the first half of the day is kept at leisure for you to unwind after your long journey. After lunch, our city expert shall meet you in your hotel lobby for an introduction to the wonderful city of Delhi and this is followed by a tour of the city.

Should your flight arrive after lunch, this day will be kept at leisure and your city sightseeing shall begin on the next day.

Overnight stay will be at The Claridges, New Delhi on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis

DAY TWO

Today has been dedicated to exploring Delhi. Our sightseeing for the day showcases the various facets of the city and how it evolved over the last 1000 years. The city expert leading the experience shall talk about various influences on culture, art, architecture, cuisine and more.

Overnight will be at The Claridges, New Delhi on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis

DAYS THREE, FOUR AND FIVE

Early this morning you transfer to the airport and catch your flight to Indore. This will be our entry point into Central India (or the state of Madhya Pradesh) to our first destination here – Maheshwar.

You should arrive into Indore by 0800 (depending on flight schedule, however, we shall select flights based on arrival time close to 0800). Before you continue onwards to Maheshwar you will break for breakfast in a hotel in Indore. The journey to Maheshwar from Indore should take about 2hr 15min by road.

Your home in Maheshwar will be the Ahilya Fort Hotel. Ahilya Fort, in the central Indian town of Maheshwar, sits high above the sacred river Narmada. Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar ruled here from 1765 to 1796 and built Ahilya Wada, her personal residences, offices, and darbar audience hall, within the fort.

In the year 2000, Prince Richard Holkar, her descendant and son of the last Maharaja of Indore, converted his home in Ahilya Wada into a guest residence, today known around the world as the Ahilya Fort Hotel. The

Ahilya Fort Hotel has 19 rooms of character, set in six buildings of the 18th century, with modern amenities and comforts. Guests stroll through 3 acres of courtyards, fountains, and gardens that link areas within the Wada. It is easy to find a secluded spot to read a book, sip some tea, or just watch the butterflies flutter by. Please note many of their rooms are accessed via a flight of 10-15 steps, however ground floor rooms are available on request. The hotel is well located to explore the highlights of Maheshwar, including its bustling village markets and riverside complex of temples and cenotaphs.



Some key experiences that we shall be participating in or exploring during your stay at Maheshwar are:

A visit to Rehwa Society and the Ahilya School: The not-for-profit Rehwa Society was started in the late '70s by the Holkars, with the objective of reviving the ancient hand weaving craft of Maheshwar and giving employment to women. Today over 80 weavers are at work, and our textiles are famous throughout India. Situated a five minute walk from the Hotel, the centre has traditional wooden hand looms, and have their own dye house. Surpluses from the sale of textiles supports the adjoining Ahilya School, which was started for weavers' children. Both can be visited in the same morning

A visit to the Ahilya Organic Farm: Their organic 15 acre farm is a 10 minute drive from the Hotel. The farm provides much of the livestock and produce used in their kitchen. You can pick your lunch, and watch your dinner growing! They use traditional and organic farming methods, and our ploughs are still pulled by our sturdy local bullocks.

A day visit to Mandu: A short drive (75 minutes) away are the ruins of the 15th century fortified city of Mandu, on the edge of the Malwa plateau. One of India's most romantic sites, these Islamic buildings pre-date the arrival of the Mughals and are scattered over 60 square kilometres of forests. The Royal enclave is built around a lake, and the nearby tomb of Hoshiang Shah served as a model for the Taj Mahal. Mandu is especially attractive in the monsoon months of August and September.

Mandu is famous for the love story of Rani Roopmati and Baz Bahadur. Rani Roopmati was a poet and the consort of the Sultan of Malwa, Baz Bahadur. Roopmati features prominently in the folklores of Malwa, which talk about the love between the Sultan and Roopmati. Adham Khan was prompted to conquer Mandu

partly due to Roopmati's beauty. When Adham Khan marched on the fort Baz Bahadur met him with his small force and was defeated, Roopmati poisoned herself. Thus, ending the magical love story which was steeped in music, poetry, romance, war and death. This romance is considered a legend by some whilst others consider it to be true.

While in Mandu we shall organize a picnic lunch at an unforgettable location. There is a secluded location with breath-taking views of the surrounding valleys and plateaus. Picnic might not be the best way to describe it as it is more like an alfresco picnic with tables, chairs, linen, glassware served by smartly uniformed staff.

Highlight for many and much recommended – Roopmati's Picnic on the Narmada: Roopmati's Picnic takes place in one of Ahilya Fort's several locations on or along the Narmada River. After the sun has gone down, board your hand-poled boat to be transported through hundreds of flickering lamps while local musicians serenade you. Their servers will serve refreshments while you dream and float to your destination, where an elaborate candlelit dinner picnic awaits you.



DAY SIX

Today we have not planned any activities in the morning – it is time that can we use to enjoy the property, to unwind or to explore a village nearby. After lunch make your way to Indore airport to catch a flight to Nagpur. On arrival you will be met and transferred to your hotel for one night.

Overnight will be at Le Meridien, Nagpur on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis.

DAY SEVEN

Today begins your exploration of the wildlife diversity of Central India. After breakfast you check-out and transfer by road to Pench Tiger Reserve. The journey to Pench Tree Lodge from Le Meridien, Nagpur should take about 3 hours. This afternoon, once you are settled in take your first jeep safari into Pench Tiger Reserve.

Pench Tiger Reserve lies partly in the state of Madhya Pradesh and partly in Maharashtra. We shall be visiting the part that lies in Madhya Pradesh. The park derives its name from the Pench River which is the main lifeline of the park and a key water source. It has an appealing landscape of dry and moist deciduous forest

and Teak is the major tree of the region along with a mix of Saja, Mahua and Indian Ghost trees. The vegetation is of undulating scrublands as well as bamboo patches around hilly areas. The park has 39 recorded species of mammals, 210 species of migrant and resident birds and estimated 30 species of reptiles. The park is known for good sightings of Tiger, Leopard, Wild Dogs, Jackals and many other mammals & birds. **Overnight will be at Pench Tree Lodge on a full board basis**



DAYS EIGHT AND NINE

You continue to explore Pench for two days – we have planned two more jeep safaris into Pench Tiger Reserve for you per day. You should note that safaris in the tiger reserves are controlled by the government and they allow two visits each day for about 3 hours each. The safaris timings are decided on the changing sunrise and sunset patterns – you take your morning safari from sunrise (0600) to about 0930-1000, the afternoon safari is from 1500 to sunset (usually around 1800).

Overnight will be at Pench Tree Lodge on a full board basis

DAY TEN

This morning after breakfast you move on to Satpura Tiger Reserve. The journey to Satpura should take about 5hrs, however, most parts of the journey are quite scenic as you drive through Tamia which is surrounded by Satpura forests.

Over a century and a half ago, an officer of the Bengal Staff Corps found himself captivated by the Central Highlands of Madhya Pradesh. Captain James Forsyth was one of the first Europeans to explore and fall in love with Satpura. While the National Park was established in 1981, the Satpura Tiger Reserve was set up in 2000 under Project Tiger. The park is part of the government's initiative to preserve and reclaim the dwindling forests of wild India.

The Satpura Hills run from East to West, with the Pachmarhi Plateau practically in the centre of the area at an elevation of 1,050 meters. The Satpura Tiger Reserve is 1,427 square kilometres comprising of Satpura National Park, Bori and Pachmarhi sanctuaries. Within the Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve, the Satpura National Park is the core zone and the remaining area serves as the buffer zone with an approximate total area of almost 5,000 square kilometres. The region is largely hilly, veined by a number of streams and nullahs

that have gouged deep ravines in the land – a terrain that perfectly suits the reclusive habits of most predators. It was perhaps this charming landscape and the rich tapestry of flora and fauna that drew James Forsyth to the Central Highlands so many decades ago.



The park is also unique as it allows you to explore the jungles in unique ways. There is a 2night 3 day trek through the park trying to re-trace the step of Captain James Forsyth. The idea is not to trek but to explore the flora and fauna while hike through the jungle. The park also allows walking safaris, canoe safaris and in certain selected areas night/dusk drives with spotlights.

Depending on what time you leave Pench we expect you to arrive by about 1400 so that you arrive in time for lunch. Since it is a long journey to Satpura we have not planned an afternoon safari.

However, should you choose to explore a bit today we would highly recommend the dusk drive as it allows you to explore buffer areas that offer a good chance to see nocturnal species such as the sloth bear, the rusty-spotted cat, different species of nightjars and a variety of owls. Of course, there is always a chance to see a leopard or the tiger.

Overnight will be at Forsyth Lodge on a full board basis

DAYS ELEVEN AND TWELVE

As there are a variety of experiences offered in Satpura Tiger Reserve we shall plan safaris based on the time of the year and wildlife movement and which experience may work the best for you. At the same time some of these safaris are ideal for:

Walking Safari: This experience is excellent for birders, herpetologists, and for those who are interested in an active holiday. It is an ideal experience to observe lesser fauna that is often missed in fast moving jeeps.



Canoe Safari: These safaris is a great experience to find aquatic/riverine birds, to get close to crocodiles and also offer photographers a very different perspective even for land mammals coming down to the river to drink. In the past we have found den sites of dholes (Asiatic wild dogs) and other wildlife on banks not accessible by road. Canoe safaris of course are excellent for viewing sunrise and sunsets. It is also important to note that in the summer months the river does dry up significantly as a lot of water is re-directed to farmland by the government.

Churna – Full Day excursion: Churna lies in the heart of the park and thus can only be accessed if we use both the morning as well as the afternoon safari. In the morning we make our way to Churna Forest Rest House (FRH) and in the afternoon drive we make our way back. Please note the time in between the two safaris has to be spend in and around the Forest Rest House. There is a creek here which is quite nice and attracts birds, butterflies along with some deer and on rare occasions big cats can be seen here as well. A hot lunch is prepared and served at the FRH.

Churna use to be the location of a tribal village. This village was relocated once the park became a tiger reserve. A lot of cattle was left behind as the villagers were unable to take it along with them. These cattle became feral and became easy prey for tigers. It is quite exciting to access this part of the park as there are very few who choose to explore this far away and therefore in most cases you will be the only tourist in this part of the forest.

As mentioned, before we will check with the lodge naturalist team to choose the best combination of safaris on these two days. We would ideally like to do a full day at Churna on one of the days and on the other day do a morning walking safari and ending the day with a canoe safari.

Overnight will be at Forsyth Lodge on a full board basis

DAY THIRTEEN

This morning take your last drive into Satpura tiger reserve. Please note while exploring Indian jungles all breakfasts will be picnic breakfast inside the park. After lunch on this day we shall check out and transfer by road to Bhopal. The journey to Bhopal take about 3.5hrs. Enroute to Bhopal is a UNESCO world heritage site of Bhimbetka Rock Shelters which is renowned for its ancient rock paintings. Some of these paintings date

back 10,000 to 30,000 years. For those of you who are interested do let us know in advance so that an expert can be organized to help you explore the same.



Alternately you can make a short stop to briefly explore the site on your own. The rock shelters also have information boards at each of the sites with explanations. Remainder of your day in Bhopal will be at leisure.

Overnight will be at Jehan Numa Retreat on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis

DAY FOURTEEN

This morning we have organized a heritage walk of the city of Bhopal along with a visit to the Tribal Museum which Bhopal is known for. After lunch head to the railway station to catch a train to Agra. The train journey allows you to see the Indian countryside. The train coaches are comfortable, air-conditioned and refreshments are included and served on board.

You should arrive in Agra at 2130 and on arrival you will be met off the train by our representative and transferred to your hotel for a speedy check in.

Overnight will be at ITC Mughal, Agra on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis

DAY FIFTEEN

Early this morning explore the Taj Mahal at sunrise. Please note the Taj Mahal remains closed on Fridays thus we should plan travel so that you are not here to explore on a Friday. Return to your hotel for breakfast, after which you check out and make your way to Chambal Safari Lodge. Enroute explore Itmad-ud-daulah a beautiful tomb that pre-dates the Taj Mahal but is built with marble at a smaller scale than the Taj.

National Chambal Sanctuary is a unique wildlife experience as it is the river and its surrounding area which is the protected area. Ancient Indian texts refer to the Chambal as the Charmanyavati - originating from the blood of thousands of cows sacrificed by the Aryan King Rantideva. Its 'unholy' origins have certainly helped the Chambal survive, and thrive, untouched and unpolluted, and it remains one of India's most pristine rivers.

The Chambal Ravines (altitude 200-500m) are the product of centuries of soil erosion by flood and rainwater. They form an incredible maze of intertwining mud cliffs, with tropical dry scrub forest vegetation, that provide shelter for numerous birds, mammals and reptiles.

The National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS) is a 400 km stretch of the river Chambal and a 1 to 6 km wide swathe of the ravines on both sides of the river, covering an area of 1235 sq. km. It was granted the status of protected area to help revive Gharial crocodile (endemic to Indian subcontinent) population decimated by indiscriminate poaching. It is one of the last surviving habitats of the Gangetic River Dolphin and is home to eight species of turtles and the smooth coat otters. The Sanctuary boasts a rapidly increasing and impressive list of over 330 species of resident and migratory birds and is gaining a reputation as one of the most reliable places to see the Indian Skimmer.

Only about 1.5 hours away from Agra you should arrive at Chambal Safari Lodge by around lunch-time and the afternoon is at leisure. We recommend this evening take a jeep safari to explore the Sarus Crane Conservation Reserve. The endemic Sarus Crane is considered to be the tallest bird of flight and they have a very beautiful dance ritual when breeding. The Sarus Crane Conservation Reserve starts around 30 km from the Chambal Safari Lodge, extending to about 100 km. It is a widespread wetland area interspersed by cultivated fields where large numbers of the Sarus Cranes breed. Although not a protected area, since 1999 the Supreme Court of India has recognised its importance as a habitat, and has designated the area a reserve with restrictions on development. Several species of wetland birds and raptors are also found along the course of this safari.

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



DAY SIXTEEN

This morning set against a stunning backdrop, framed by the ravines and sandbanks, the calm waters of the Chambal River are best explored on boats. The gentle pace of the River Safari is designed to provide spectacular sightings of the gharials, muggers and turtles basking in the sun; the many migratory and resident birds flying sorties; the occasional glimpses of the Gangetic river dolphins breaking surface. The National Chambal Sanctuary is 22 km – 35 minutes' drive from the Chambal Safari Lodge.

Lunch is at the lodge and in the afternoon we take the Blackbuck jeep safari that heads southwest towards the countryside between the Chambal and Yamuna ravines, for excellent sightings of Blackbuck antelope

and numerous dry land birds including the Indian Courser. It is also a fascinating journey through remote hamlets and habitations; a world that is strangely as connected as it appears removed from modern India.

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

DAY SEVENTEEN

This morning is a late start and there are no activities planned. We recommend that after an early lunch you check out and transfer by road to Delhi airport from where you connect on to your international flight back home.



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