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India Trip Report February 2013



Peg Abbott and Avi Sarkhel, tour leaders, with eight participants: Bud, Gingy, Nancy, Judie, Patrick, Angela, Jerry, and Judy.

Thurs., Feb. 14

Arrival in Delhi / Shanti Home

Our entire group decided to arrive early in India, to shake off the grip of jetlag, rest up from travels, and start to absorb the colorful frenetic world that comprises Delhi, Old and New. To do so we planned ahead for some additional city time. Avi, our local guide extraordinaire, arranged a delightful and knowledgeable local guide named Neelam for us. She obviously loved the complexities of Delhi, a city of

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sixteen million and growing by the day. She endeavored to share that with us over the course of two days.



The first surprise for many was the crush of traffic, which in Delhi occurs even at midnight or five in the morning, the times of some of our airplane arrivals. Judy and Nancy, flying direct from Chicago, timed their arrival for daytime, and had a stunning flight over the snow-clad Himalayas. Most others came in towards midnight, and Peg and Patrick at dawn, so our first meeting was for lunch at noon on the open-air rooftop restaurant of our boutique hotel, Shanti Home.



started with a drive through New Delhi, a planned city built by the British, now verdantly green with extensive parks, large trees, and some lovely buildings. The International Embassy sector was impressive to all of us as we peered at the enclaves of nations from all over the world. We passed the Presidential Estate, now open to the public, the

After lunch, we ventured out to explore, and the following day we combined a morning of nature with an afternoon in the city for a second view. We



modern art museum, the army quarters, air force offices, and homes of some of the wealthy of the city.

We then went to Old Delhi, parking our bus by the Red Fort, which lies opposite of India's largest and most famous mosque known as the Jama Masjid. These two massive red sandstone buildings are iconic architectural structures built by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in the mid-1600's, concurrent in timing to

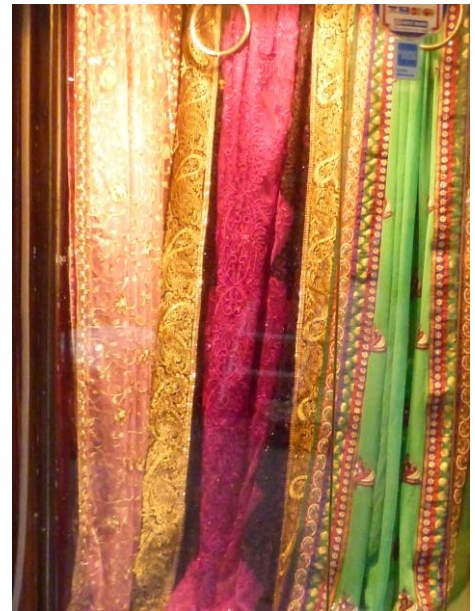


the construction of his masterpiece, the Taj Mahal. They are signature buildings of Old Delhi. We navigated in view of them as we passed by rickshaw through the narrow streets, winding through a pulsing mass of activity where people buy and sell everything from shoes to saris, hot bread, embroidered brocades, wedding stationery and “recycled” auto parts. We teamed up two by two, and strong, weathered men pedaled the rickshaw bicycles with us aboard as passengers. From our seats we could photograph and gawk at the chaos of tangled electric wires, hanging perilously close to the hordes of people below with their flammable wares of paper and cloth. There were carts of food everywhere and the smells were heady. Hot doughnuts, spicy balls of couscous and lentils, tandoori meats, hot bread. Entire small kitchens were assembled on the backs of bicycles, their patient vendors welcoming those buying or just stopping by to chat. There were piles of colorful vegetables looking bright and clean set amid

the grime of the street.

Passing through the narrow alleys where sari fabrics were sold provided us a dazzling pageant of color. We got out to walk through the spice market, with time to buy a few packets of saffron, packages of mixed white, green and black peppercorns, and curry spices. Faces of the vendors were as colorful as their wares, while above them, almost unnoticed, danced Rhesus Macaque monkeys on bare wires.

Riding the rickshaws let us flow through this teeming river of human activity with relative ease, thanks to the expertise of our drivers, who also kept a very close eye on us as we wandered. We wove through the traffic neck and neck with bicycles hauling heavy boxes, containers of fuel, children going to school, women shopping, and tourists like ourselves. We witnessed one crash, in which a load of boxes went sprawling, the only time we



experienced a heat of tempers or sensed in such a crowd that things could quickly get off balance.

We followed this adventure with a bit of sightseeing through the bus windows, with no one complaining after our riotous walk through the spice market. We drove into a stunning architectural area of government buildings, built by the British imperial government and designed by architect Edwin Lutyens. These massive buildings include the Indian Parliament, and like Shah Jahan’s buildings, they are made of Rajasthan red stone and marble. These buildings mix colonial and Mughal elements and

appear particularly impressive as they surround palatial open spaces, creating grandeur not unlike the feel of the Taj Mahal and Humayun's Tomb. India retained this section of the city for use by their government after independence.

From here we finished the day at a place of quiet and beauty, Gandhi's Memorial. Here, people from around the world walked as we did, around the raised square above the shrine. The late sunlight was pretty, and colors of flowering dahlias in bloom blended with fabrics of women in traditional dress. We



had left our binoculars at the hotel, thinking we were focused on seeing the city, but here were our first avian encounters: Asian Pied Starlings, both White and Yellow wagtails, Indian House Crows, many Black Kites, and Indian Mynas. We shared the one pair of binoculars we had, and all enjoyed a sense of openness and leisure after the chaotic world we'd ridden through while exploring Delhi.

Dinner tonight was at the home of Pratap Malhotra, friends of Avi's that our previous group had so enjoyed a visit with that Peg asked if we could return. This lovely Indian couple greeted us warmly and we shared easy conversation and a well-prepared meal in their home. Pratap poured us some fresh juices or Kingfisher beers, then sat and talked of his days as a tea planter up in Darjeeling. Through the door came their daughters, with grand-daughters and sisters-in-law, going about their day but stopping to say hello. Smells from the kitchen were enticing, and it was not long before the Malhotra's ample table

was filled with carefully crafted dishes of food.

We helped ourselves to delicately spiced chicken, yellow lentils, rice with chick peas, a lovely masala paneer, dahl, roti, a spinach paneer dish, gently grilled cauliflower, an aloo and pea dish (potatoes), yoghurt with roasted chick peas, and more. The table was a work of art, and the room went quickly quiet as everyone tasted it all, until Gingy announced, "all yummy". Patrick led the way to seconds,



and we barely had

room for the very light rice pudding with grated carrots and chopped pistachios which was dessert.



A stunning abstract painting behind the serving table reminded us of a winter scene of bison in snow, something we tried to express to our hostess without much success, reminding us we were so many miles across the world. We felt very appreciative that these kind people would invite us into their home, and give us a glimpse into the sense

of oasis one gets once home in Delhi.

Getting to our “home” was quite a task, almost an hour with traffic revved up. Avi encouraged us to just sit back and enjoy the show. There was no shortage of sensory input, and soon we were on overload watching every form of transport imaginable combine before our eyes. Just as by daylight, cows and dogs fed among giant trash piles, while men sat reading the paper, three at a time, in the light of their vendor stalls. The streets hummed with life, goods were carried in ways we’d never dreamed of, and everywhere people enjoyed their street food.



As our day and night were still reversed, most of us fell into bed on return. Shanti Home was lovely to return to.

Fri., Feb 15

Okhla Bird Sanctuary / More of Delhi



Our first glimpse at wild nature in India was at a gem of a wetland preserve called the Okhla Bird Sanctuary, located quite close to Delhi. After reaching the gate, the world seemed transformed. As Avi paid our entrance fees, delightful signs with photos of water birds whetted our anticipation. Soon we were walking along, setting the scope up on White-bellied Water Hens, Indian Pond Herons, Ruddy Shelducks, Indian Spot-billed Ducks and to our surprise, at a distance a group of a dozen or more Greater Flamingoes! There were also birds of the brush to see, starting with a group of Green Bee-

eaters, and then less conspicuous Ashy and Plain Prinias, Lesser Whitethroats and Greenish Warblers. We walked beside a large open water area to scan; all could participate in the search as several of the birds were familiar, such as Northern Gadwalls, Northern Pintails and Common Shovelers.

We then parked the bus, and walked beyond the open water area to a marshy zone, finding the first of what would be many White-bellied Kingfishers. Crossing a rickety bridge to reach the start of the trail, while trying not to laugh so we could stay in balance, made for some fun. In a dense reed area we encountered Striated Babblers that entertained us with their antics. Bud caught some nice shots of Red-whiskered Bulbuls. The preserve has several raised platforms, and from one we got superb views of a Pheasant Jacana and views of our first members



of the antelope tribe, a group of female Nilgai. The light was good, and we found Yellow-bellied Prinias active below us. Time passed very quickly, and it was only hunger and a desire to see some of the city that finally drew us away.

Avi shares our Naturalist Journeys love of eating well on a birding holiday. Today he chose a marvelous spot for lunch, a place called Oh Calcutta! This fabulous restaurant had welcoming décor, including modern lighting, room divisions and some lovely paintings. But it was the food that was so memorable. We started with a refreshing fresh limewater, followed by some appetizers brought to the table. The first were vegetarian followed by scrumptious Chicken Pakora. After the first course, we served ourselves at a buffet— it was quality food, including cauliflower and potato with poppy seeds, prawn malaikari, a savory chicken in sauce and more. Also popular was the Kingfisher beer, served cold and crisp against the spices of the food.



Angela had requested that we see the National Craft Museum, which has an excellent collection of textiles. We were impressed with the many Terra Cotta figures greeting us, many of them life-sized, including horses. We wound our way into the textile section, where a stunning array of saris and different styles of woven goods were on display, many old and precious antiques. Just before we were to go we stumbled on to the internal vendors' market, which was fun. Gingy spied a big paper tiger she grabbed right away and others found a few small items.

Our next stop was Humayun's Tomb where one could amble about for a day in and of itself. People from all over the world were here, many of them from India. Neelam, dressed in a lovely sari herself, patiently took us around, explaining in a lively way the history here. We were jet-lagged and easily distracted by all the local color. The buildings were massive, with impressive architectural details, and known as the precursors to the Taj Mahal. Like other buildings of Delhi, and parts of the Taj, this was constructed from rich red sandstone blocks shipped in from Rajasthan.



Flocks of Rose-ringed Parakeets whirled about, and one tree held a big group of Yellow-footed Green Pigeons, which Jerry had also seen at the museum.

We made a visit to the Heritage Center for some retail therapy, enjoying a chance without much pressure to look through textiles, carvings, jewelry, and more. Before turning us loose, they demonstrated how carpets are made in Kashmir. The man demonstrating was elegant, and quickly drew us in to his love of the craft and admiration of



the product. Angela found one to take home with rich colors and the tree of life motif. Others found scarves, including

Peg, who rarely took hers off for the cold weather we had much of the first half of the trip.



What goes out from “home” in Delhi has to return, and we experienced the repeat of traffic cacophony winding our way back through the city. Our driver, Dhan Singh, had to work hard to keep us safe, as a virtual torrent of life poured in all directions, honking, weaving, cutting in, and challenging. Our base, the Shanti Home, is in a busy section of the city, and how it achieves such a sense of security and peace within is quite amazing. It’s a lovely little refuge, and at dinner we found the chef and wait staff greeting us with a surprise. We had made

our way to the rooftop restaurant, and what a warm welcome! Upon entry we were handed a turban, the gift of a bracelet tied on our arm, and then a lovely display of food. Tucked in, we rested well after a full and rewarding day.

Sat., Feb. 16

Early Train Ride to Agra / Agra Fort / Chambal River Lodge / Bateshwar Temples



“What time did you say we had to get up, Avi?” is a phrase we would use several times on this journey, as to meet trains and planes we had to go with existing schedules and they were not always kind. On this day we were bound for Agra, home of the Taj Mahal, and also the closest larger city to the wild reaches of India’s Chambal River, sanctuary for several endangered species. We navigated the streets of Delhi, to arrive at the station in the dark, where porters quickly vied to help us. Avi selected a team, and they kept the others at bay. We stayed

close together, though still waking up I think a few of us thought lying down with the piles of sleeping citizens stretched out slumbering on simple blankets on the concrete did not seem like a bad idea...

Once on the train, we had comfortable seats, hot coffee, a packed breakfast, and in three hours’ time we disembarked in Agra. The system of luggage carrying, men piling our heavy cases atop one another, atop their heads, was amazing! Our bus driver had gone to the city the night before, and was there to



wow!

We then stopped at a lovely hotel, the Trident, for a quick coffee. Avi was amazed that we found the shop in no time, and came back to the bus with little piles of goods. From here we drove from Agra, passing through the countryside to Chambal River. It was fascinating to see the cattle, women gathering dung, the neat dung fuel piles, the thatch huts they dry the dung rounds in, home construction, camel carts, people carrying



burdens on their heads, old tractors working as if in their prime. Each village has a well with good clean drinking water, but sadly sanitation seemed non-existent. One learns in India to look past the trash piles that line the roads and spaces between dwellings. Through it all, women, like bright butterflies, always seem immaculate, though working hard, in their saris.

Normally Chambal River Lodge would have lunch waiting for us on the lawn, but a series of torrents had begun, and we arrived just after a very strong rain. It

continued to drizzle as we let the staff regroup inside. It was also quite cold, much more so than normal, so they scurried to find a few heaters. Lunch was delicious, with dishes of cauliflower, eggplant, chicken and lamb and a yoghurt and cucumber salad.

We could not chance burying the bus on the road into the river boat launch after such a storm, so we decided to go the medieval Bateshwar temple complex on the Yamuna River for a bit of birding and some fun exploring in a rural setting as well. Just passing through the colorful market between Chambal River Lodge and the temples was a sensory delight, passing by tables of mangoes and peppers and eggplants and cabbages. Vendors work hard at artistic

meet us. In his typical fashion, Dhan was impeccably neat, courteous and ready. It was very nice to see a familiar face, and he was pleased to show us the entry gate to Agra Fort. We would love to have taken a tour, but one would need a half day or more, so we contented ourselves with viewing it, and the Taj Mahal across from it, from the outside. It was a wet day, but as we got out and looked off to the Taj, the sun lit it like a spotlight for a few moments –



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display; abundance seems apparent. There were also fascinating sectors of this rural market: vehicle repair, hardware items, a shaving booth, ironing stations, sewing shops....



The temples are picturesque, lining the Yamuna River which also passes by the Taj. From the terrace we had a great view of species flying along the near and far shores. We identified a good number of waders including Painted Storks, Black-winged Stilts, and way downstream, we caught sight of our first endangered Indian Skimmers. Sunil, the local birding guide from the lodge, was very good, and seemed to enjoy this change of pace as well. We got the scope on Red-rumped Swallows, studied the martens, and enjoyed flights of River Terns. Several of us took off our shoes to go through the temples, finding a lovely spot from which to photograph the line-

up of temples, once over a hundred in number. We watched as friendly goats walked in and out of the holy spaces, leaving calling cards at the door. The owner of Chambal River Lodge hopes to see the temples restored, and they are working on a community project designed to do so. The light of sunset really showed them off, and we lingered, so glad that the rains had cleared enough for us to visit.



Dinner at the lodge was gracious, with really delicious food, not any of the standard dishes we'd see at tourist restaurants, but treasured family recipes. Anu Dhillon Singh was there along with her husband, Ram Pratap, as gracious hosts. They expressed great surprise as a storm moved in and we experienced hail, the first time since 2002 at this location.

We ate well, and rested well in the cottages. Before we retired, Sunil showed many of the group an Indian Palm Civet, a resident wild mammal on the grounds.

Sun., Feb. 17

Chambal River / Chambal River Lodge Birding / Hosted Cocktail Party



This morning was absolutely remarkable in the array of bird species seen in a short and enjoyable boat trip on the Chambal River. Ahead of the boat ride, we spent some time walking along a rural area, finding our first colorful Hoopoes, Indian Rollers, and jaunty little Indian Robins.

We were quickly mobbed by kids, all saying "bye-bye" and smiling and wanting their photos taken. Between photos we'd find a new bird, and when the pandemonium got too exciting we continued on further out of town. We stopped

in a section of arid hills where we found some exciting birds, including Yellow-eyed Babblers, Rufous-fronted Prinias (very local here), our first Bay-backed Shrike, Common Babblers, some very bright Sunbirds, Gray Francolins, and both White-capped and Crested Buntings. Both people and birds were bright parts of our morning.



We boarded two small skiffs to motor down the river, and right from the start we were among numerous birds. There were Greater Thick-knees roosting on a small island across from where we departed, almost nose to nose with the first of many wild Gharials. There were egrets and herons of many varieties, Black-bellied as well as River Terns, and Red-naped Ibis, striking creatures with a russet head and neck. The size and quantity of Marsh (Mugger) Crocodiles was MOST impressive, some close to twenty feet in length. We learned by observation that they could move quite quickly! Flocks of Bar-headed Geese flew up and down the river, and Ruddy Shelducks seemed particularly



numerous. We had some small bird gems such as Blue Rock Thrush, and one of the boats got good views of Bonelli's Eagles. In all we saw some of our finest birds this day, and we very quickly saw how productive the remaining wild places of India can be. The Chambal is the target for some vital conservation programs at present.



In the afternoon we decided we'd had such fine luck on the river, we'd stay and bird around the lodge. It proved productive as well. Sunil delighted us by having scoped out several owls, and to our amazement he was able to put scopes on Brown Hawk Owl as well as the Indian Spotted Owlets. Jerry spotted a Verditer Flycatcher, the same magical blue color as our Mountain Bluebird back home. A Black-rumped Flameback flew in – a most impressive woodpecker!

At dusk we walked out through the neighboring agricultural fields to a few small ponds, checking for cranes (not there) and waders. We quickly became a tourist attraction for the local villagers who



gathered around us. As we returned to our cottages, the Indian Fruit Bats were getting restless to fly, making circles around their large roost tree.

This evening Ram Pratap Singh hosted a cocktail party for us in the beautiful library of the lodge. The room is known as Mela Kothi and it is lovingly restored to its once-held grandeur. He talked of his family ties to this land and his memories as a boy of the big cattle fairs. He and his wife left the business life of Delhi behind to start this lodge,

and have poured themselves into it, opening up opportunity for the community as well.

Mon., Feb. 18	Taj Mahal / Bharatpur / Keoladeo National Park
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We woke this morning to thick fog, but decided to stay with our plan to depart early enough to be some of the first in to the Taj Mahal today. We all looked forward to seeing this great wonder of the world in good light, but wondered as en route we could barely see the vehicles in front of us. It was tough driving for Dhan, and after a sudden stop for a large vehicle in front of us, we were grateful for his skills as he wove through the seething morning mélange of vehicles and people.



There must have been a cattle fair over the weekend, and on this Monday morning, people were walking their cattle, buffaloes and oxen home. They lined the road by the score, the animals somehow knowing they had better stay near their new owners and four-legged brethren lest they risk contact with the large, painted trucks, bicycles loaded to the brim with everything from boxes to large bags of fodder, or tuk-tuks designed for four and carrying at least twelve persons apiece. In the fog all the motion took on a surreal air; we made the best time we could, and we reached the Taj in time to watch the rosy orb of the sun rise above the East Gate we'd walked through – and not make a dent in the fog.



The fog was so thick that we could only see detail of the inlay work on the deep red sandstone of the Taj Gate standing close to it. We tried to keep positive. We could see the onyx inlay of the script of the Koran, ringing the arches and doorways. We'd get glimpses of the towers, of the immensity of the structure, and then they would disappear. Our cameras had difficulty picking up any sharp line on which to focus.

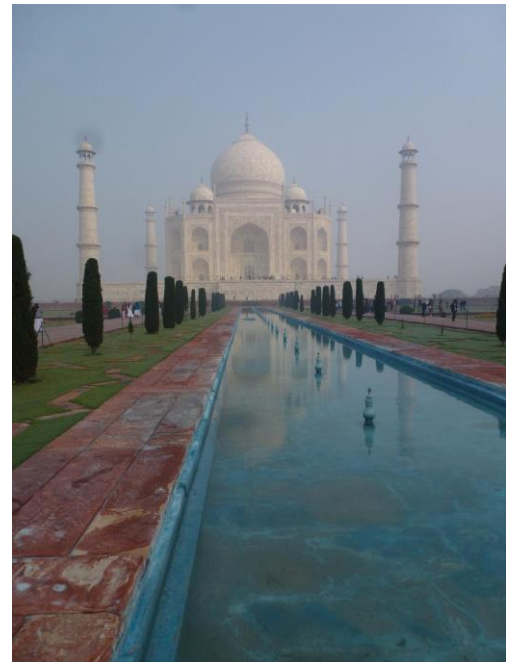


Our guide led us down the long line of the reflection pool, with no view of the Taj at all. Getting closer, a corner Minaret emerged, then a wall, then – as our hopes grew – the curve of the main dome. We decided it was good to go inside the Taj to see its fine detail, and hoped it would clear while we examined the inlay work of carnelian, lapis Lazuli, jasper, turquoise, onyx and more. To do so we put on shoe covers required to enter the tomb, throw-away tissue creations that made us all look like clowns.

The quality of the inlay tile work was rivaled only by the quantity; entire panels of intricately worked

marble surrounded the interior crypt that held the Emperor and his beloved Empress. Each flower on a panel could have sixty-four or more intricate inlaid petals, varying shades of the same color to give it depth and form. Geometric borders complemented the floral motifs, bringing harmony from repeated form. The same inlay and carved marble work could be found on the deep red sandstone of the three massive buildings that held gates opening on to the garden complex. Long views through arches brought intrigue.

We could not, however see much at all upon our emergence. We knew the Taj was built on the banks of the Yanuma River, as we had been upstream, but other than some near shore fencing we could not see it at all. We heard House Swifts chattering above the minarets and towers, and in time both the birds and the towers began to appear. Walking off the main plaza level to try for a view from afar, we could see the mid-section of the Taj begin to glow. Jerry commented on the light, having read that it changes dramatically throughout the day. We were seeing this in action, as the sun finally broke through.



By this time there were hundreds of people admiring the Taj, photographing themselves with the Taj, watching the pageantry of groups of people coming in. Particularly colorful was a large group from Rajasthan, the men wearing bright turbans and women in their best saris, wrapped in shawls in every color of the rainbow. A young woman, likely a new bride, had on one with fine gold fibers, and she glowed. People-watching pulled our attention away from the building's beauty, but soon it would return. The stunning symmetry and form of the Taj, with the

blue sky behind it, was a joy, a perfect gift for Judy and Jerry, celebrating their 35th wedding anniversary and Peg, celebrating her birthday.



We extended our stay at the Taj quite a bit past when we thought we might, but took time to go to a store in Agra where they still create the fine inlay work, producing tables, small boxes, and gift items. They showed us how the pieces for the inlay are carved on stone wheels, in the same way they were centuries ago. We got to see the pieces of raw stone, and while we enjoyed some coffee they showed how resilient and strong the marble is. It is cut at a quarry in Rajasthan, the same area as that for the Taj, almost 300km away.

Avi had arranged for a cake for the celebrating trio of Judy, Jerry and Peg, and we all enjoyed the sweet treat immensely. They came out with it lit by candles and then cut it on a plate of inlaid marble stone, serving us on small tables – plenty of time for us to study the inlay designs. A couple of members of our group picked out tables to buy, one small enough to carry, the other larger but fine to ship. Several more choose smaller boxes, lovely in design. Back on the bus, those done with shopping watched the flow of street life, as we'd parked near a construction site where we watched women in saris come and go with large metal bowls on their heads. They would slip the bowls off; a man would fill



them with rock material needed for cement being made on site. They walked elegantly with their burdens, back and forth, a half a dozen strong butterflies wrapped in color, working hard. They would greet each other in passing, sometimes walking two by two. Each time they had to cross the street, careful not to step in front of a horse-drawn cart or motorcycle.

From here we headed to Bharatpur, and by now Judy, Nancy, and Angela had joined in the challenge of snapping some shots of street life. As the bus whizzed past markets of bright fruit, lumber, auto parts, paint, the local outdoor barber, buffalo wallows and more, we took in what we could. No one wanted to miss a thing, so strong was the pulse of life.

We drove for about an hour and a half, arriving at our palace accommodations in time for lunch. Laxmi Villa Palace has two sections, the original family home and guest house of the Raj, and a new section mimicking both it and the Taj. The dining room was teeming with guests; quite a surprise after our quiet days at Chambal River Lodge. It was an international crowd and from our table, while sampling the mix of Indian food with unappealing pastas and most-welcomed French fries, we heard multiple languages. We had time to settle our things in our rooms, but were back out fairly soon to meet our local guide, Harish, to start our exploration of this great wetland park of Asia. Keoladeo National Park at Bharatpur





gained its reputation as a stronghold for endangered Siberian Cranes, one of the world's rarest species. We knew that this species had not been seen since 2002, but were pleased to hear that plans were in the work to restore the population, in partnership with the US-based International Crane Foundation, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Indian and local governments.



We decided to walk out to an area where we'd have wetlands to view on both sides. There were so many birds that it was hard to know where to look first. We set the scope on Indian Pond Herons, a beautiful White-throated Kingfisher, both Great and Purple herons showing off breeding colors and plumes, and some very cute Little Grebes. Some of the most numerous species were ducks we knew, Northern Pintails, Gadwalls, and Northern Shovelers, joined by a few that were new, including Indian Spot-billed Ducks. Avi called out, "Black-necked Stork" and soon this elegant bird of giant proportions flew right over our heads. At the end of a loop walk, we watched a White-throated Kingfisher with a very large fish he clearly struggled with, whacking it on the limb of a shrub, while hanging on tight not to lose it.



It was a leisurely afternoon, with lovely light on a troop of Rhesus Macaques that had several mothers holding small babies, some of them cavorting in trees above while others were quietly nursing. We found our first Spotted Deer, saw a female Nilgai, and we heard the constant chatter of the Five-striped Squirrels. An Eastern (Eurasian) Marsh Harrier put hoards of the ducks on alert just as we turned back, making circles at moderate height just off the path. One of our first birds of

the afternoon was the beautiful Yellow-footed Green Pigeon; one of the last was a Yellow-crowned Woodpecker that fed just in front of us, and then seemed to tuck itself in for the night on the underside of a branch.

We were desperate to do our bird list after several days of not finding time to do so, but we got it all well sorted, using Jerry's careful notes, and Avi and Peg's keen memories.

Dinner was Indian food, fresh hot naan as the bread with a



nice tamarind sauce, chicken, fish, several vegetables and, Gingy noted, a towering dessert of puffed pastry and cream, labeled as “Profit Rolls.” Throughout our trip, English translations on signs provided humor.

Tues., Feb. 19

Keoladeo National Park at Bharatpur / Birding by Rickshaw

Jerry and Judy entertained us at breakfast with tales of receiving a late-night cake in honor of their anniversary, complete with lit candles on delivery! Avi leaves no stone unturned when it comes to taking good care of us!

There was fog AGAIN this morning, and our local guide Harish called us to say not to hurry. We departed at 8AM and walked through misty wet Kadam woods near the gate. With limited visibility, trunks of these massive trees took on mystical energies, and the whole place felt like we were birding among the pages of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. We were after a good look at Dusky Eagle Owls, and with some searching, we found these massive birds staring down at us from on high. We found the chick first, and then with some additional searching the adult. It made a couple of short flights with no apparent haste, and then stared down at us as only owls can do. We then found Black Redstarts, a Black-rumped Flameback, Red-breasted Flycatchers and a very sweet, singing Gray-headed Canary Flycatcher which had the endearing quality of returning often to use the same perch; perfect for our photographers. Asian Magpie Larks were present, a Tickell’s Thrush, Hume’s Leaf Warblers, and one of our favorite, albeit common, birds, the jaunty Rufous Treepie, dressed so smartly in rust, black and white.



We could sense the fog lifting so hurried back to board the rickshaws to get quickly out along the dike system of this extensive park, managed for its water levels which right now were quite high. The number of birds was staggering, and included hordes of ducks, coots, herons, grebes, ibises, and storks. Painted Storks took the prize on beauty with their intense colors. At one point we watched an adult stork come in to feed two gangly chicks, while at another spot one preened and posed, oblivious to our interest.

Harish, our local guide, could be called the Eagle Whisperer today, for between he and Avi constantly watching the sky, we picked up a super list of raptors, including: Booted Eagle, both Greater and Indian Spotted Eagles, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Crescent Serpent Eagles (both flying and perched) and a probable Tawny Eagle. We also had a small accipiter, the Shikra, circling above. In the marsh areas, there were bright plumaged Bronze-winged Jacanas alongside hundreds of moorhens and coots, and a few very active Purple Swampheens. The

White-throated Kingfishers had competition for our oohs and aahs today from the Common Kingfisher and we did quite well at identifying some butterflies in the warmth of the sun; an easier task than the host of small “little brown jobs” of the brush. For mammals we saw a Grey Mongoose, both Spotted and Sambar deer, and some very well-fed Nilgai.



It was a fantastic day, with an impressive tally of species, but more than that, a chance to walk in a quiet world of nature, far from the crowds and congestion of urban India. The bird sounds were extraordinary, and we found ourselves recognizing quite a few. The beauty of light playing on the marshes, with herons and egrets walking elegantly in time with their perfect reflections, was mesmerizing. Everyone hated to go, but we’d been going strong

since our arrival, and all needed some hours for laundry, email,

notebooks, checklists, and making order of the mounds in our suitcases. We stopped for wine en route home, hoping to save a bit on restaurant charges. They had just four bottles, at a reasonable price, and we cleaned them out. We find local color in small ways and it’s always an adventure.



We did the bird list in Nancy and Judie’s palacial room and admired the sunset at we went to dinner, after a very full day.



Wed., Feb. 20
National Park

Bharatpur / A Second Day at Keoladeo

After breakfast at our palace hotel, we had a second full day to enjoy the marvelous birding at Keoladeo NP, and less fog to contend with at dawn. Harish called to urge us to come ahead, as the Siberian Rubythroat was at its favorite spot close to the entry gate – amazing to see this little beauty so close, and right in the midst of the group gathering area. Our same crew of rickshaw drivers was ready to meet us, and we passed through territory we’d spent time in the day before in order to explore the back section of the reserve. While yesterday was a day of eagles, this day was a day of rarities, starting with Black Bitterns so regularly we quit stopping for them! Yellow Bittern was a great find and we got scope views, at a quiet little pond where reflections formed

perfect renditions of the birds, and in some cases helped us to find them!



We saw many Black Bittern this day, new for almost everyone. But when your guide gets a life bird you know it's a good one, and Avi – closing in on 1000 birds sighted in India – was thrilled to see the Water Rail, quite well, in dense vegetation but so close we got good views.

Peg has specifically asked if we could try for Sarus Cranes, as Nancy and Judie would join Naturalist Journeys' crane trip to the Platte River in a few weeks, and this would let them see one of the most

magnificent of the world's seventeen crane species ahead of that visit. At one point our rickshaw drivers scattered to search, and one soon came back with a big smile. Harish said that there were currently three pair in residence, and we were fortunate to find one of them quite close to the road. They were intent on feeding, pulling tubers from wet soils, and keeping their heads down intent at the task – making it sporting to catch a good photo.



The morning passed quickly, decorated with the colors of Painted Storks, Bronze-winged Jacanas, bright breasts of Common and White-throated kingfishers, breeding plumage of so many ducks. The sheer numbers of birds were staggering. We combed through them to find a few new species, and then retired to a lodge in the park to have lunch, some very nice Indian food, this round quite spicy.

Having seen so much and filled up on lunch, most of the group's energies were sagging, and the comforts

of the hotel called. Still along the way home they rallied to look for Rock Pythons and then a side trip through the streets of Bharatpur to look for Painted Snipes. Sadly this beautiful bird is best seen in a water channel running through town that is terribly polluted. We saw them perched on plastic bags and poking about the mess while feeding – distressing. Black-winged Stilt and Green Sandpipers kept them company.

Peg and Patrick went back into the park by rickshaw, wanting to see the old Raj hunting lodge, and see whatever else they might encounter. One of their most exciting finds was a good look at a large Bengal Monitor, sunning itself in the sand of the road, reluctant to move as it enjoyed the warmth after surviving the unseasonable cold of two nights before. Walking in to the abandoned lodge, they saw a large group of over fifty Spotted Deer which had numerous bucks clad in fine antlers. They spied a Common Kestrel, Purple Herons, and other species seen over the last couple days.





It was lovely to just coast through the reserve by rickshaw, taking in the big picture of the park's beauty, replete with marvelous wetland and wildlife productivity.

Dinner was at the hotel, in their lovely dining room which outshone the quality of the food by a long shot. Good for our waistlines to cut down a bit!

Thurs., Feb. 21

On to Ranthambore National Park

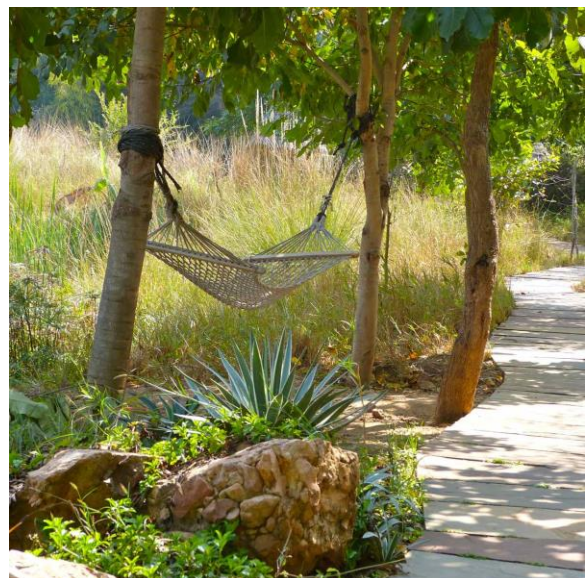
We had a nice break today from our regular o-dark-thirty wake up calls, as our train today did not depart until 10AM. We had time to pack, enjoy breakfast, and get some photos of the hotel before setting off. Today was mainly a travel day, and an adventure it was! Navigating a train station in India makes one infinitely glad that one is with a group, shepherded by a master like Avi, whose team gathered quickly to flank us as we stepped around sleeping bodies, passing a mass of humanity before going through the gates, then more on the platform itself. This was a train of historical interest dating from 1928, the

Golden Temple Mail train. On this one, rather than row seats, we had sleeper cars, top and bottom bunks with curtained partitions. We settled in, and in essence were thrilled to simply have a window, having seen a number of trains pull through without them. The trains are packed, and people-watching while on them was fascinating as some families were thoroughly encamped in their sleeper berths, having been on for one or more days. People read, chatted, and slept, and about three hours later we arrived at the Sawai Madhopur station serving Ranthambore.



The village of

Ranthambore was so green and clean after the grime of Delhi and Bharatpur! We marveled driving out from the station to see neat homes and yards, almost no trash, and lush fields; what a lovely haven in India! And this was just the start – we landed at our own stunning oasis, Khem Villas, a model eco-lodge tightly integrated in the local community. With great care, this property had been transformed from barren fields into a forested and fertile oasis that we could fully enjoy.



The staff of Khem Villas had a late lunch set up for us, and it was immediately apparent how committed they were to producing healthy, local foods. Yeah! We could eat all the salad greens and fresh raw veggies that we wanted. At today's lunch our timbale-filled pitas had fresh cabbage, onion and greens. This and other lunches were superb, a chance to sample International cuisine whereas dinner highlighted vegetarian Indian dishes. One day they had pizzas, another they served a lovely Thai curry, along with side dishes like green beans al dente.

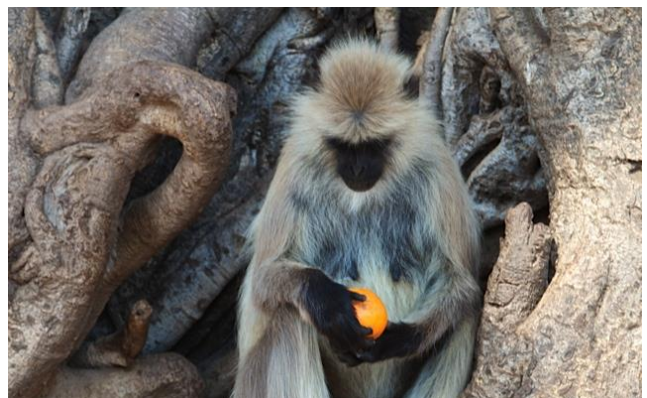
Our cottages were also lovely, very private with indoor and outdoor showers, gracious patios, and nice furnishings. They had a tempting shop that many of us did some damage in, a spa, and a nice mix of spaces to sit and enjoy nature – a hammock by the pond, dual bamboo chairs by the pool. They also had rich, brewed coffee, an immediate hit with several after several days of just “tinned” coffee.



We were inspired by the comfort to lounge, but tigers, birds and adventure awaited us, and we quickly finished lunch to jump in the safari vehicle, a rambling 15 seat capacity jungle truck. We booked them privately so we could have more space, but it was a day or more before we worked out seating comfortable for everyone, with space to photograph, and a way to see over each other. They were massive vehicles, capable of jarring your spine, compacting your neck, and otherwise man-handling you as we passed over rocks, ravines, water-crossings and

canyons. Mahesh, our driver, proved to be a safe and excellent one, and we were grateful, as the roads of Ranthambore traverse a lot of rugged terrain. Jyotirmay Sharma, our local guide, was a striking man with keen, trained eyes. He was very serious about finding us a Tiger, urging us to make the most of our time as we stopped again and again for photos of the very abundant, though adorable, Spotted Deer.

The landscape of Ranthambore was enchanting, with marvelous views of the massive tenth-century Ranthambore Fort atop a massive escarpment of weathered sandstone. Huge Banyan Fig trees grew along the roadside, and at one point on the main park road we drove under an arch of one tree's branches, then immediately through a tenth-century stone gate. Everywhere, monkeys sat on the ramparts, rock walls, and arches and peacocks sunned themselves on the walls.



Ranthambore National Park, in trying to manage the pressure of tourism well, works on a Zone system, with each vehicle getting a permit that day for a given area. Each zone is accessed by driving up a main

road, one open to the public as it connects to a temple within the old Fort. This is a sacred site visited by hundreds, if not thousands, of people on most days. Wednesday was a popular day to visit the temple, so we had lots of people walking the road, shouting to us and waving; they clearly enjoyed watching the tourists as we set out on our search to find a Tiger.

Our zone this day was one known to have active tigers seen in recent days, and we drove to several spots with good potential. At one point we heard an alarm call repeated by three species – langur monkeys, Spotted Deer and Sambar, a sure sign that a leopard or tiger was about, but the vegetation was thick, and after waiting for some time with no success, we moved on. We learned the next day that



several vehicles did spot a tiger here earlier, but it had moved off, and we had to be content with good views of Nilgai, Sambar Deer, Spotted Deer, and a scattering of songbirds. We weren't too worried yet, as we had two full safari days ahead, and we knew we were with excellent guides.



Khem Villas has many small touches to their service and décor that made us so comfortable. How often does one get to have a bowl of fresh cut flowers at their door? Dinner was served buffet style, in lovely urns, and our plates a big copper tray they would warm for us before sending us into the line with small bowls for dahl and yoghurt, and the tray for rice topped with varied and delicious dishes highlighting those vegetables in season. One of the favorites was a delicate mushroom dish that was just divine.

We did not linger long or enjoy the evening campfire this night, as it has been a long day with the travel.

Fri., Feb. 22 and Sat., Feb. 23

Ranthambore National Park

The final afternoon safari on which we encountered the beautiful tiger matriarch of Ranthambore, Machali, lying on the road, will always stand out in our minds. We were the first to find her, and we watched her for several minutes before another jeep came over. She got up, stretched, and slowly walked to a resting spot near a small pond. Machali is almost seventeen years old, a celebrity that has appeared in numerous wildlife films over the years. To see a tiger at all was a thrill, to see HER was all the more so.





Ahead of that sighting, for two days – morning and afternoon – we’d traversed some of the loveliest landscapes imaginable. Ranthambore is a place of bucolic lakes and marshes tucked into pockets within rugged hills, open areas sporting long

vistas interwoven with wooded glens, and verdant lakeshores, several with ruins to complement nature’s intrigue. It has a tremendous prey base, key to its providing habitat for over forty Tigers.

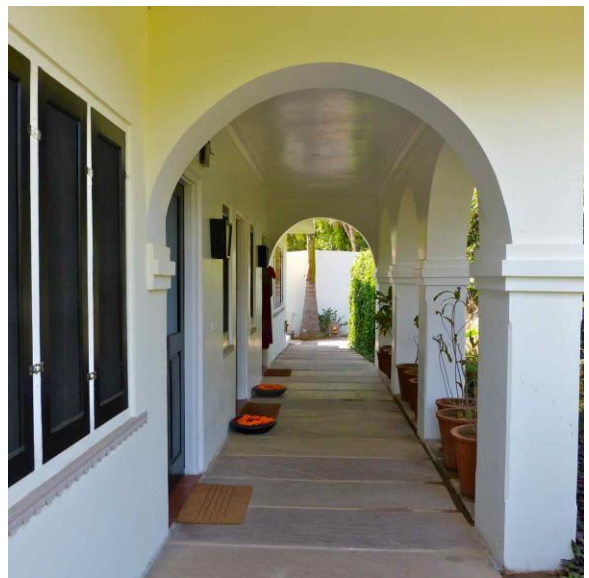


Finding one in the deciduous forests proved more difficult than we imagined. The day we found two, a glimpse in the morning, and Machali in the afternoon, we’d heard several Sambar alarm calls which we pursued.

Every place we watched and waited was beautiful. Sambar fed in the water as we watched from a small peninsula where a tiger had been spotted across the lakes earlier

that day. Egrets landed on the sambars’ backs, fishing from them even as they moved. A film crew was hanging about the area, like us capturing lovely images of Sambar and Spotted Deer with their reflections in the water.

Outside the park gate, our lodging at Khem Villas was a most relaxing place to return to. One evening we were able to visit with the owners, Dr. Goverdhan Singh Rathore and Mrs. Usha Rathore. Dr. Singh talked of his father, Fateh Singh Rathore, the famous park manager and Tiger specialist, turned activist in his later days when poaching threatened Ranthambore’s tigers. He passed away in 2011. Around the campfire, Avi asked him to describe seeing his first tiger as a boy. He told us stories



and spoke of the beauty of his father's home in the forest, one with no electricity or running water, which we'd later see on one of our game drives. He also talked about his own work today in the Ranthambore community. The lodge supports the local hospital through sales from its shop and some of the operations. They provide technical advice on animal husbandry, family planning, food production. They helped build up a woman's crafts cooperative that opened in 1989, known as Dastkar, where we did some shopping. At the entry of the property is a huge greenhouse and gardens. Their food reflects their philosophies and is vegetarian. Staying here was a highlight of our trip.



Sun., Feb. 24

A Final Day / Return to Delhi for Flights Home, or the Goa Extension

Another early train, this time one that would take us back to Delhi. Angela was to leave us at this point, and she was able to spend a leisurely morning at the lodge before catching the afternoon train where she was met by our company representatives. The rest of us continued on, shepherded by Avi who seemed to do so with such ease.

This train station was small and easy to navigate in contrast to Delhi or Agra. We had modern seats and electrical outlets, so to keep busy on the five-hour ride, several got to work on their photos and trip journals. Others read or slept, so the trip went fairly quickly. Phase one of a very long day!

Phase two was getting to the Delhi airport to catch our flight to Goa. At the airport, Gingy spotted Kentucky Fried Chicken which after a LOT of Indian food we were thrilled to find for lunch, but the lines were long and we had quite a frenzy getting food and getting to the gate. Avi held back and saved the day, phew!

Phase 3 was being met in Goa for a two hour drive up into the mountains to Backwoods Camp. It was still daylight as we wound through Goa traffic, but we could see right away that both the colorful saris and much of the trash of northern India were behind us. A seaside resort popular with Russians and Europeans, Goa seemed very prosperous, with large homes, neat walls, and streets that held mostly vehicles rather than vendors and a mass of people. It was dark as we approached the lodge of Backwoods Camp, our base for the next four nights.

In contrast to Khem Villas, Backwoods Camp was very basic, a step above camping, but it lies in the heart of some really amazing birding. It was dark when we arrived, and we could hear the call of resident Sri Lanka Frogmouths. The proprietors had dinner waiting for us – nicely presented, simple foods that

locals would eat--rice, a main dish and a couple of vegetable dishes were the norm, including pumpkins, green beans, eggplant. Though we'd had some really elegant food along the way, at this point in the trip several started to long for other, more familiar, tastes. Patrick saved the day, having brought some Mountain House packaged dishes one just adds water to. Over the next few days we snuck in a few helpings of Mac and Cheese, Chicken Teriyaki, and Beef Stroganoff which tasted pretty darn good!

Going from the luxury of Khem Villas to our little stone block cottages was a bit of a leap, but this was an easygoing group, and we were here to watch birds and we'd be sure to dive right into it – after a night of rest! And we recognized we were with real experts, and we could not wait to get out to see the birds. Sue, however, did not get as much rest as the rest of us did – it seems she had an Indian Palm Civet atop her cottage, a mammal we'd all like to have seen....

Mon., Feb. 25 through Wed., Feb. 27

Three Days Birding from Backwoods Camp

I don't think any of us will forget the morning we walked out to a field just behind Backwoods Camp with Loven, our expert guide. Birds were pouring off the trees! We saw so many species in such a short time, and as many of them were perching on open branches to sun themselves at the start of the day we got really good looks. Tails were waving as the Greater Racket-tailed Drongos chased each other, making Nancy very happy as this was one of her most-wanted birds. Orange Minivets appeared bright, as if on fire. There are a number of endemic birds in the Goa region, and we were on a fast track to learn a few!



We walked around for quite some time before returning for eggs and bread, hot tea and coffee and a break before the next outing. Peg spied the huge rust and yellow-colored Malabar Giant Squirrels that leaped like lemurs through the trees. We were all thrilled to find a pair of Malabar Trogons very close to the lodge. They seemed to be investigating a nest hole, and we got really good looks, as well as time to listen to their calls. Competing with them for our attention was a pair of Greater Goldenback Woodpeckers, wow! At lunch we had a small snake peer in from the hedgerow. At every turn, something new!



By going to Goa, we added some seventy or more species to our list of nearly 300 birds. Each morning and afternoon Loven charted a route for us to discover more. We walked near a Hindu temple several times, through streets of a village, and into lush forests. We waited in clearings for clear views of raptors, woodswallows and Mountain Imperial Pigeons. The final afternoon we walked a long ridge through Bhagwan Mahaveer Wildlife Sanctuary, ending up in a school yard where species after species flew in as children played. One little girl brought her bucket out to collect cow dung for the evening fire.

These were really memorable days at a place we could highly recommend, despite its minimal creature comforts. Nature here is at its finest.

Thurs., Feb. 28 and Fri., March 1 Mumbai, Elephanta Island, Tea at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel



In the future we'd do our final night of four at Backwoods Camp at a hotel in Goa, visiting the local Spice Farm which was fun along the way. This way the 7AM flight to Mumbai would not be such a shock! We had to get up before o-dark-thirty today, to navigate down the mountain in the dark, and we never really recovered. We toured the city in a mental fog.

Mumbai is a city of 20 million, so doing a city tour takes nerves of steel as one negotiates traffic. Gone were the camels, oxen, rickshaws and vendors of Delhi. Mumbai is like any big modern city of the world. Television dishes top roofs in the slums, which stretch out on either side of the modern freeway.

We did enjoy seeing the really fantastic architecture of the British-built part of the city, and the lovely area called the Hanging Gardens. We returned to this part of the city again the next day to this area to board a ferry to Elephanta Island, a World Heritage Site of cave art and much acclaim. We learned a lot from our local guide, and ended our trip with afternoon tea at the fabulous and iconic Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, looking out on the harbor as evening light fell. A great end to a great and exotic trip to India!



Photos by Angela Burnett, Bud Ferguson and Peg Abbott