

TRAVEL TALES FROM THE BANKS OF INDIA'S CHAMBAL RIVER**28th November, 2013**

The **Chambal River** and its surrounding area is an off-the-beaten track Indian joy, writes **Amar Grover**.

<http://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/travel/travel-ales-from-the-banks-of-indias-chambal-river>

“You’ll need real luck to spot those Ganges dolphins, but they are around,” said Ram Pratap, or “RP”, Singh. “Still, the Chambal River’s lovely and India’s crowds seem far away here.” By crowds, he’s alluding to the throng and din of Agra, just 70 kilometres to the west. Yet before even reaching the nearby river, India’s most touristed destination and iconic monument – the Taj Mahal – already seem a world apart.

Along with his wife, Anu, RP owns and operates the Chambal Safari Lodge near the Chambal. Rural Uttar Pradesh is not the most obvious place for a tourist, but just as India’s burgeoning economy ushers new opportunities, so its vast countryside offers alternatives for travellers who have already visited the area’s much-travelled hot spots.

At nearly 2,000 square kilometres, the relatively little-known National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS) (www.nationalchambalsanctuary.in) lies on the Singhs’ doorstep. Established in the late 1970s and encompassing a slender 400km-long riverine corridor in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the NCS was created primarily to safeguard diminishing populations of endangered gharials, a species of crocodile that is unique to the subcontinent, turtles and Ganges, or river, dolphins. Its allure is boosted by prolific bird life, an unusually (for India) clean, undeveloped river and the enigmatic Chambal ravines, while the Lodge’s comfort takes the edge off the region’s earthiness.

RP’s great-grandfather was a prosperous feudal chief. He built the main mansion, the Mela Kothi, in the 1890s as part of a field camp that became the base for a biannual cattle fair. By the 1980s, this fair was no longer viable and the lodge was dilapidated. Rather than let it crumble, the couple returned in the late 1990s to renovate and convert it into an eco-lodge. Today, the mansion boasts an airy annex and, across the lawn, a cluster of tamarind tree-shaded cottages with individual names like Barbet, Skimmer and Spoonbill that reference local bird life.

Later that afternoon, we head to the Chambal on a country back-road that is edged by hamlets, with munching buffaloes tethered to trees.

Oblivious to bikes and a handful of vehicles, carefree children spin hoops as women toil with bundles of fodder and men work the fields. A sandy track signals the river’s proximity at Nandgaon Ghat and we dip through strands of mesquite, acacia and gently sloping vegetable plots to reach the gently flowing Chambal.

The pontoon bridge here is long gone. Instead, a solitary flat-bottomed, engineless boat ferries villagers and the odd motorbike across the serene river to and from Madhya Pradesh state. Its banks are edged with shrubbery and seasonal fields, and there’s hardly a building in sight. The Chambal’s calm and cleanliness along much of its length springs from a curious irony. Cursed in religious folklore, it has never been holy or worshipped and so lacks temples, pilgrims and much of the human activity that makes, say, the Ganges so revered yet polluted.

The Lodge’s river safaris typically operate during early mornings and late afternoons, the best times for spotting wildlife, especially birds – the NCS has about 200 species. Sitting by our boat’s prow as we slowly chug upstream, I gaze at the riverbanks, incised with murky ravines.

Within minutes, we see black ibis, teals and beautiful orange-billed skimmers, whistling ducks with their distinctive white heads and tan bodies, and pied and white-throated kingfishers. Dinesh, my guide, tentatively glimpses a distant Pallas's fish eagle and, later, a falcon and a distant osprey.

We soon come across several slender gharials with their distinctive, long, bulbous-tipped snouts. Basking by the sandy shallows at the water's edge, they remain stone-still until we are just metres away, before quickly slipping into the river and disappearing. Bareh proves little more than an oversized village. Having taken the trouble to come, I climb the 70 or so steps to a modest temple that overlooks the confluence. Locals claim that several famous dacoits used to come and pray here before embarking on their crime sprees. Though appearing smaller than the Chambal, downstream from here, the Yamuna's name, if not flow, is dominant. On a nearby hillside, I notice the ruins of Bareh Fort. During the 1857 Mutiny (or, as Indians prefer, the First War of Independence), after its raja sided with the rebels, British forces sailed down the Yamuna to attack it. Later, I return to the Yamuna at nearby Bateshwar. It's an auspicious spot, a kind of low-key Varanasi, with a hundred or so whitewashed riverside shrines and temples with bathing ghats, or steps, leading down to the water. Come late October or November, there's an annual livestock fair here (among India's largest), then a few days' interlude followed by a religious gathering that draws tens of thousands of pilgrims. Both these elements are rooted in antiquity and I'm lucky enough to attend the latter.

Few tourists make it here and, unlike Varanasi, there are no touts or hustlers, petty con men or cremations. Country folk stream down to the river in their hundreds, laden with flowers, coconuts, pale, sugar-rich sweets and garish powders – the essential accoutrements of a Hindu pilgrim. Shrines stand knee-deep in casually discarded offerings, bells clamour and loudspeakers crackle with distorted hymns and a three-day-long continuous reading of the Ramayana. As the setting sun dips into a smoky gauze enveloping the thronged riverbank, barefoot devotees begin launching little leaf rafts of marigolds and burning candles that bob away while dusk seeps into the sky.

Yet Bateshwar also wears the look and feel of a country fair – there's a lethal-looking Ferris wheel and a rudimentary roller coaster. Myriad snack stalls and greasy eateries, a firmament of fairy lights and an exuberant good-natured atmosphere all speak of a good day out. Except perhaps for the puzzling old lady who I notice patiently dragging a weighted string through the riverbank's shallows. "She has magnet – searching for coins ..." explained a man at my side. For her, I suppose, this is just a day's work.

NORTHERN INDIA TRIP REPORT

1st - 18th December 2013

Tour leaders: Markus Lilje and Clayton Burne

<http://www.rockjumperbirding.com/wp-content/media/Trip-Report-Northern-India-Dec-2013.pdf>

In the late afternoon we boarded our bus and drove to our rustic lodge near the Chambal River. Arriving late we still had a little time for looks at the smartly patterned Brown Hawk-Owl at its day roost as well as finding Yellow-wattled Lapwing.

That evening, after a bit of a search, we found two Asian Palm Civet, which showed very well indeed. The next morning we drove down in our bus to the Chambal River, to arrive at first

light. We walked down the last section of rough road to the boats awaiting us, trying to pick up a few species in the trees and bushes. Unfortunately the fog was very thick, so we struggled to see much, although we did come up with Syke's Warbler, Red Collared Dove and Grey-breasted Prinia. Our main target on the river was Indian Skimmer (as we had already seen Black-bellied Tern) and it wasn't long before we found them – 31 in total – resting on mid-river sandbanks! Other highlights on the river included the smart Bar-headed Goose, Great Thick-knee, Sand Lark and distant Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. We also had our first views of huge and bizarre Gharial and the more common Mugger Crocodile and Indian Tent Turtle catching some sunny rays as they loafed on the Chambal River's sandbanks.

NORTHERN INDIA BIRDS & TIGERS

27th January - 13th February 2014

<http://www.rockjumperbirding.com/wp-content/media/Trip-report-RBT-Northern-India-I-2014.pdf>

The following morning we drove down to the Chambal River. This area is much dryer than any other region that one visits during our North India trip, offering a whole different selection of species that are restricted to the arid landscape surrounding the river. Two of the key species here are Indian Skimmer and the delicate Black-bellied Tern, and we were thrilled to locate both of these elegant birds including 21 of the former. Other highlights at and around the river included a pair of Brown Crake seen really well at close range, the impressive Bar-headed Goose, more Red-naped Ibis, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Hume's Short-toed and Sand Larks, and the impressive Gharial and Mugger Crocodiles.

INDIA'S PURE, WICKED WILDERNESS

5th February 2014

Sheema Mookherjee

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20140128-indias-purewicked-wilderness>

Once home to gun-brandishing bandit gangs, India's National Chambal Sanctuary is a wicked wilderness full of crocodiles that can overturn boats and incredibly agile blind dolphins.

Until three decades ago, the area around the River Chambal in India's northern state of Uttar Pradesh was inhabited by gun-brandishing, horse-riding gangs of bandits who claimed the badlands as their undisputed territory. Today, the area is better known for having one of India's most unpolluted rivers and a rich, unique range of avian life protected by the **National Chambal Sanctuary**, set up in 1978. (The gangs' leaders, meanwhile – as the joke goes – have been co-opted into the system as members of Parliament).

The Chambal, a large tributary of the River Yamuna, is virgin territory for most travellers; some of its purity, of course, stems from its seclusion. To access this region, visitors must drive 70km southeast of Agra to the hamlet of Jarar. The tiny town is home to the **Chambal Safari Lodge**, the area's only resort offering organised safaris and expeditions.

The drive itself, however, is part of the experience. The fertile Uttar Pradesh countryside is packed with paddy, wheat, sugarcane and mustard fields and dotted with villages that prosper from farming and dairy. It brings to mind the quintessential landscape of *Brajbhoomi*, the mythical land of Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Hindu Lord Vishnu.

Abruptly, the wicked wilderness of the Chambal Sanctuary appears, with desolate tracts of scrubby alluvial plateaus criss-crossed by deep gullies and ravines. Apart from a single driveable road, there is not a shop, house, or sign of life anywhere.

From the Chambal Safari Lodge, originally a row of stables and two-storey bungalow that served as a field camp for a biannual cattle fair, travellers easily can explore the area – whether by boat, jeep, horse or even camel safari. While some guests take their own vehicles, it's advisable to hire one of the resort's well-informed naturalists as a guide.

Boat safaris down the Chambal mesmerise animal-lovers with glimpses of rare species. The endangered gharial – fish-eating crocodiles characterised by their long noses – sun themselves on the mud flats, their bulbous noses protruding in the air. Scarcer – perhaps fortunately so – are the larger, more menacing marsh crocodiles; they can easily overturn a boat with a lash of a tail. (Luckily, the river is wide enough for boats to keep a safe distance). Turtles plop in and out of the water; occasionally, the dorsal fin of a Ganges river dolphin flashes. The famous blind inhabitant of north India and Pakistan's rivers and tributaries, the dolphin is so quick and agile that catching one on camera challenges even the quickest of photographers. For birders, the Chambal's more than 200 bird species include the river tern, the skimmer and the sarus crane: the world's tallest flying bird and indigenous to the wetlands of India. On land, meanwhile, blackbucks and other smaller mammals such as jackals, foxes and hares are common. Domesticated camels are too, especially as they're used by villagers as transport. Lodge-organised camel safaris go across the river to the ruins of **Fort Ater**, a 17th-century bastion built by royal chief Badan Singh Judeo that witnessed many skirmishes between the Mughal, Rajput and Maratha clans.

In the nearby town of **Bateshwar**, 7km northwest of the Chambal Safari Lodge, there are more than 100 temples dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. Standing in a serene row along the Yamuna river bank, a few have interior frescoes, fascinating for the extent of their Islamic influence.

The architecture of each temple differs, reflecting domes and arches typical of various regions of India: the flattened dome of Bengalese architecture stands next to a typical Islamic dome and a pointed Hindu temple spire. Bateshwar is also famous for its annual cattle fair, one of India's largest, expected to take place in the first week of November 2014. Today's Chambal may be far from an untamed region of skirmishing gangs and territorial disputes. But with its ecological diversity and cultural gems protected, it remains wild – in the best, and most sustainable, of ways.

INDIA: RANTHAMBHORE, BHARATPUR, NAINITAL AND CORBETT

February - March 2014

<http://wingsbirds.com/tours/india-ranthambhore-bharatpur-nainital-corbett/narrative/>

Leaving Bharatpur we headed east to Agra and the Taj Mahal where we had an excellent guided tour around the marble wonder before moving on to the Chambal River Lodge – a gorgeous, family operated, modest sized hotel close to the mighty river from where it derives its name. We had a boat ride on the river the same afternoon and were blessed with outstanding encounters with a pair of perched and later flying Indian Skimmers, a Black-bellied Tern, some superb Black Ibis, a Brown Crake as well as numerous, close range encounters with both Gharial and Muggler Crocodiles! Gorgeous scenery, great weather, some excellent birds, a superb atmosphere and excellent food - what more, other than a better look at the ever elusive

Gangetic Dolphin, could we have asked for? Before we left our lodge the following morning we also found the regular Brown Hawk Owl and Common Hawk Cuckoo in the hotel's garden!