

TRAVEL: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO EXPLORING INDIA'S 'GOLDEN TRIANGLE'**28th November 2014****Caroline Daniel**<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/2b720528-666b-11e4-8bf6-00144feabdc0.html#slide0>

"YOU must come to see this!" shouts our naturalist, Gajendra Dagar, as we arrive back at the Chambal Safari Lodge. Several intrepid waiters and a turban-wearing snake specialist troop past hammocks, across the lawn and into the bush. The event that has prompted such excitement is a 6ft-long cobra being attacked by three mongooses. The furry assassins eventually dissect it into three pieces. This is all 50 yards away from our room; it is hard to believe we are only a few hours from the crowds posing on the "Lady Diana" bench at the Taj Mahal.

I have come to Chambal, 70km southeast of Agra, to find an alternative way of doing India's "Golden Triangle", the tourist circuit that takes in Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.

British-based tour operator Audley Travel has put together an itinerary designed to let visitors see all three, but also to immerse themselves in village life in rural India. After seeing the sights in the cities, guests retreat to hotels in the countryside nearby.

After a hectic day in Delhi that had begun with a cycling tour, and the next day spent in Agra, the Chambal Sanctuary lives up to its name. It is a 425km stretch of river that has been under national protection since 1979. The river, a 30-minute drive from the safari lodge, is broad, serene and devoid of people. Although we spot a jungle cat, the real interest is in the water, with 320 species of birds, turtles, the critically endangered gharial (a fish-eating crocodile), and the rare Gangetic dolphin.

Two British birdwatchers who share our boat point out kingfishers — a flash of aquamarine feathers — an osprey flying aloft with a fish and a red-crowned roofed turtle with florid stripes on its neck. With the engine off, the only sounds are birdsong and the splash of dolphins.

Our trip has fortuitously coincided with the Bateshwar Cattle Fair, which takes place close by and is one of the country's biggest. Dating from 200BC, it starts before Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, and runs for three weeks. On offer are not only cattle but oxen, goats, camels and, on the morning we visit, horses. It is an epic spectacle — I feel I am walking into the past. Before me is a vast plain, dotted with orange and yellow tents spread over several miles. The scene is hazy from spirals of dust thrown up by horses pawing the ground. There are nearly 25,000, many tethered with ropes, others paraded by men with well-tended moustaches. We are the only tourists, and are soon swaddled by an entourage of the curious and the bored, who stare at us constantly yet benignly. Owners are eager to show off their horses — from white ones with peculiar blue eyes to Afghan stallions. One man attracts a crowd as he leaps on his horse, Ruby, and stands on her back doing bending exercises, then grins contentedly as he hugs her neck. Her bridle says: "I love my horse". There are stalls selling plastic necklaces for cattle and horses for Diwali, when farmers honour their animals by cleaning or painting them. One stall owner shows me how to attach a tinsel-laden jacket to the back of a patient horse. On our way out, we pass an advert for breeding stallions, with images of rabbits to highlight their potency.

I couldn't feel further from the typical tourist trail. As dusk sets in, we head to the nearby Bateshwar temples. There are more than 100 temples in the complex, dedicated to Lord Shiva. They are in a state of decay but are atmospheric and empty of tourists. A Hindu ceremony is

under way and our guide encourages us to remove our shoes and join in. Amid burning incense, we joyously smash the brass clangers with childlike glee before heading back to the hotel.

Chambal Safari Lodge has 13 rooms set in a 35-acre plantation. As we sit drinking cold beers, I meet the owner, Ram Pratap Singh, who exudes a calm, quiet ambition. He has a keen sense of his local heritage — this has been the main seat of his family since 1472.

Even here, he warns, there are signs of change. Rural life is slowly being eroded, he says, as distinct villages become sprawling towns, while land prices soar.

Caroline Daniel is editor of FT Weekend

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NORTHERN INDIA

1st - 18th December 2014

Trip Report compiled by Tour Leader: David Erterius

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

In the late afternoon, having enjoyed the Taj Mahal for several hours, we boarded our bus and drove to our rustic lodge near the Chambal River. After check-in and a scrumptious dinner, we went to search for Asian Palm Civet on the grounds of our accommodation. We were soon rewarded upon finding three animals that showed very well indeed.

The next morning we drove down to the Chambal River, to arrive at first light. Our main targets here were Indian Skimmer, Black-bellied Tern, Gharial and the rare Gangetic Dolphin. It didn't take long before we spotted our first Black-bellied Tern, and a total of two individuals were recorded during our boat ride. Other birding highlights on the river included Garganey, Red-crested Pochard, Red-naped Ibis, Western Osprey, River Lapwing, Kentish Plover, Temminck's Stint, Pallas's Gull, Pied Kingfisher, Oriental Sky Lark, Blue Rock Thrush and White-browed Wagtail. We also had fabulous close looks at the huge and bizarre Gharial while the more common Mugger Crocodile and Yellow-bellied Tent Turtle were also around, catching some sunny rays as they loafed on the Chambal River's sandbanks. Unfortunately however we missed out on the Indian Skimmer and the Gangetic Dolphin this time. On our drive back to the lodge, we had our only sighting of the localised Black-breasted Weaver. After lunch, we were prepared for a long drive to New Delhi, but before leaving the tranquil woodland surrounding the lodge, we enjoyed great looks at the smartly patterned Brown Hawk-Owl at its day roost.

INDIA WILDLIFE SPECTACULAR

28th January - 15th February 2015

Mike Watson

<http://www.wildimages-phototours.com/pdfs/report/INDIA%20WILDLIFE%20SPECTACULAR%20REP%202015-ebook.pdf>

A little further south in Uttar Pradesh we visited the delightful National Chambal Sanctuary, the last unpolluted major river in all of northern India, where we enjoyed our most productive sessions of the whole tour with encounters with numerous Gharial and Marsh Mugger Crocodiles, Great Thick-knees, Indian Skimmers, River Lapwings, pelicans and much more.

We skipped Agra's Red Fort again, unfortunately it has sadly not been as well appreciated as its neighbouring World Heritage Site and our previous folks have always wanted more of the

wonderful Chambal River. Therefore we had two river cruises along the River Chambal in the National Chambal Sanctuary again this time. These were by far the most productive photo sessions of the whole tour with some of us taking well over two thousand photos per day of numerous different interesting wildlife subjects.

The highlight of a river cruise along the Chambal is undoubtedly an encounter with the second largest crocodile in the world, the long-snouted Gharial (second only to the monstrous Saltwater Crocodile). We saw plenty of them including a few large-nosed males, amongst the more widespread Marsh Mugger crocodiles. The National Chambal Sanctuary was declared in 1978, mostly to protect this critically endangered, fish-eating crocodile. Named after the Nepalese word 'ghara' meaning earthenware pot, referring to the enlarged growth on the end of the snout of mature males, which can grow to six metres long and one tonne in weight. There are fewer than 400 breeding pairs left in its remaining range, a mere 2% of its former distribution, which used to include Pakistan, Burma and the Brahmaputra. A truly magnificent animal! We also had a really bonkers close encounters with a huge Marsh Mugger Crocodile, which refused to budge from its resting place on the riverbank and thankfully decided not to join us in our boats.

Another major attraction here is the endangered Ganges River Dolphin and the encounter we had this year included some semi-breaches and I even managed a (albeit record) shot of one this time. They seem to favour the same deep section of the river that I have seen them in year after year, downstream of a couple of river islands and upstream of a large meander, just as they are supposed to. These creatures face a range of threats from pollution to water development projects, hunting (Ganges and Brahmaputra) and entanglement in fishing gear but happily they continue to flourish in the Chambal River. A rich variety of wildlife can still be found on the Chambal, including pretty much all of the characteristic species of the large slow-flowing rivers of the Gangetic drainage system that were once found all over northern India. It really is like stepping back in time and other relics included the now endangered Black-bellied River Tern. Also here were: flotillas of Bar-headed Geese from the other side of the Himalayas, grazing on the weed in the river; Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, also winter visitors from Central Asia and the impressive Pallas's Gull from the same area, Ruddy Shelduck, paired up as well as a couple of Golden Jackals on the prowl. We also photographed a pair of nesting Pied Kingfishers; a crazy Striated Heron perched on one of the abandoned pontoons that allowed approach to almost within touching distance plus a furtive Brown Crake along the nearby riverbank. As the sun was setting on our evening cruise we finally caught up with another major target here, the amazing Indian Skimmer, with its 'snapped-off' shorter upper mandible, bouncy flight and even living up to its name with a little skimming.

There was only a pair this time, however, we were relieved to see them at all once we discovered that skimmers had not been seen for around ten days and lots of other folks had gone home disappointed lately. Although the light was fading fast by now, they even arranged themselves in the reflections of the orange sun on the water.

Once the thick morning mist had cleared our next cruise also afforded several opportunities to photograph some attractive River Lapwings (now a threatened bird of the Indian Subcontinent's large slow-flowing rivers) and the peculiar Great Thick-knee. A 960km long tributary of the filthy River Yamuna, the Chambal River has evaded development and its inevitable pollution owing to the river being considered unholy! The river is reputed to have

been cursed by a princess as well as carried the blood of thousands of sacrificed cows, ironically saving it from the even worse fate that has befallen the other rivers around it. Our very pleasant lodge near the Chambal was as delightful as ever and a wonderful evening meal here was followed after dark by some Common Palm Civet photography in the lodge gardens. In daytime there are usually some interesting birds in the near vicinity and this year's visit again resulted in some good photo opportunities of Spotted Owlet. We were sorry to head back north to the bright lights of Agra, then Delhi via the bizarre empty new Yamuna expressway and the next stop on our tour, the 'Kipling Country' of Madhya Pradesh state.

NORTHERN INDIA

30th January - 16th February 2015

Trip Report compiled by Tour Leader: David Erterius

<http://www.rockjumperbirding.com/wp-content/media/Trip-report-RBT-Northern-India-I-2015.pdf>

Eventually arriving at our rustic lodge in the early afternoon, located in a tranquil woodland, we enjoyed a scrumptious lunch and thereafter drove to the Chambal River. The afternoon was devoted to a boat safari on this spectacular river, protected as the National Chambal Sanctuary, and our targets included Black-bellied Tern, Gharial and the rare South Asian River (Gangetic) Dolphin. It didn't take long before we spotted our first Black-bellied Tern, and a total of two birds were recorded during the boat ride. Other avian highlights included Red-naped Ibis, Striated Heron, Great Stone-curlew, River Lapwing, Pallas's Gull, Pied Kingfisher, Desert Wheatear, White Wagtail of the nominate, personata and baicalensis subspecies and White-browed Wagtail. Three Dalmatian Pelicans were soaring high overhead and we had a number of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse flying by and further looks at a pair coming to drink at a riverside sandbank. The huge and bizarre Gharial and the more common Mugger Crocodile were both easily located as they were resting on the riverbanks and both Yellow-bellied Tent Turtle and Indian Softshell Turtle were around, catching some sunny rays as they loafed on the riverbanks. (Chambal supports 8 of the 26 rare turtle species found in India!). However, maybe the most memorable sighting was of the rare and endangered South Asian River (or Gangetic) Dolphin. We had numerous views of this fascinating creature as two individuals repeatedly surfaced the water in a river bend. On our drive back we spotted the only Long-legged Buzzard of the trip, perched on a roadside tree. Back at our lodge we enjoyed another scrumptious meal, and then went on a short walk in the dark to search for Common Palm Civet. We were soon rewarded by finding four animals that showed very well indeed.

INDIA - CHAMBAL RIVER

9th March 2015

<http://zootheabirding.blogspot.com/2015/03/india-chambal-river.html>

After a long night's rest we drove down towards the Chambal River, stopping along the way to walk through an arid area of canyons and thorn scrub. I was surprised to see a couple Jungle Prinias here, and there was also Ashy and Grey-breasted Prinias as well for comparison.

It has to be said that India is like no other country in many respects, no aspect more apparent than the sheer volume of birds one sees whether driving along or walking. I can't remember feeling this in the past and must have taken this amazing aspect of India's wildlife for granted,

having done so many tours here. But it is absolutely true and the sheer quality and variety of birds on view wherever you stop and look is a total contrast to many countries these days in Asia. To illustrate this fact, a small muddy puddle at the end of the lodge's drive held both Green and Wood Sandpipers and a Common Redshank, whilst driving across the arable landscape we saw so many Green Bee-eaters on the wires, along with Chestnut-shouldered Petronias, Indian Rollers and Baya Weavers it was hard to not stop every time we came across a group of birds. So we sauntered along the road and saw Grey Francolin, numerous Rose-ringed Parakeets, Laughing Dove, Indian Robin, a brief Yellow-eyed Babbler, lots of Bank Mynas, both Common and Large Grey Babblers and overhead a superb Short-toed Eagle looked huge.

A short drive took us down to the Chambal River and a quick scan revealed Paddyfield and Tawny Pipits, Masked and White Wagtails, Crested Lark and some close River Lapwings. Once aboard our 'sturdy' vessel (or tub may be more appropriate) we headed along the river and it was a little choppy due to the high wind but that didn't stop us seeing a multitude of birds and top of the list were the 7 Indian Skimmers roosting on a sandy island. Having been told the previous evening that they are not as guaranteed as in the past and have been missing for a long time until very recently I have to admit I was a trifle worried. However, here they were and we lapped up the fantastic views.

We also saw all the other usual birds during our exploration such as Great Thick-Knees, a group of Knob-billed Ducks, Ruddy Shelduck, Temminck's Stint, Pied and White-throated Kingfishers, Red-wattled Lapwings, and several Indian Black (Red-naped) Ibis. Returning to the lodge the large pond on the approach road held a flock of fresh breeding plumaged Painted Storks avidly feeding and allowing great photo opps. Even at lunch it was difficult to not get distracted by Indian Grey Hornbills, Rufous Treepie, Brown-headed Barbet, Oriental White-eyes and a Grey Mongoose. Oh and how could I forget the day roosting Indian Scops-Owl or the Spotted Owlets.....? We birded the gardens and surrounding fields in the late afternoon and enjoyed views of Taiga Flycatcher, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Plain Prinia, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, and a pool full of birds with Bronze-winged Jacana and a couple of Greater Painted Snipes being the pick of a good bunch. We walked back to the lodge and ended a great day with a superb dinner.

THE CHAMBAL RIVER – A SANCTUARY FOR GHARIALS

2014-15

Text by Andrea Ferrari

<http://www.animamundimag.com/the-chambal-river-a-sanctuary-for-gharials/>

Most visitors to India – if interested at all in the wonderful wildlife of the subcontinent – hope to see a tiger in the wild. Some will also be happy with elephants, birds and the occasional cobra. But – gharials? Why, most people don't even know what a gharial actually is! In fact, gharials are pretty amazing creatures, and the stuff of legends – besides being highly endangered, major biological indicators of river water quality. Since briefly glimpsing one almost forty years ago in the swift waters on the Rapti river in Nepal, we had long dreamed to see them again in the wild.

And to see gharials in the wild there is no better place in the whole world than the remote, romantic Chambal – a rugged, desolate, spectacular wilderness where nature, history and culture intermingle as only in India they can, and which we visited together with our dear friend and wildlife photographer Yuwaraj Gurjar, with the help of local biologist Rajeev Tomar. The National Chambal Sanctuary, also called the National Chambal Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary, is a 5,400 square km (2,100 sq mi) tri-state protected area in northern India. Located on the Chambal River near the tripoint of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, it was first declared in Madhya Pradesh in 1978 and now constitutes a long narrow eco-reserve co-administered by the three States. Within the sanctuary the wide, pristine Chambal River cuts through mazes of rugged ravines and hills, fringed by long, wide, deserted sandy beaches – the landscape itself is worth the trip. The critically endangered gharial and the red-crowned roof turtle live here, and together with the endangered Ganges river dolphin they are the keystone species of the sanctuary. Other large threatened inhabitants of the sanctuary include the mugger crocodile, the smooth-coated otter, the striped hyena and the Indian wolf. The Chambal supports 8 of the 26 rare turtle species found in India, including the Indian narrow-headed soft shell turtle, the three-striped roof turtle and the crowned river turtle. Other reptiles include the Indian flapshell turtle, the soft shell turtle, the Indian roofed turtle, the Indian tent turtle and the Bengal or land monitor lizard. Mammals include rhesus macaques, Hanuman langurs, golden jackals, Bengal foxes, common palm civets, Indian small mongooses, Indian grey mongooses, jungle cats, wild boars, sambar, nilgai, blackbuck, Indian gazelles (chinkara), northern palm squirrels, porcupines, Indian hares, Indian flying foxes and hedgehogs. The Chambal Sanctuary is also listed as an important bird area and is a proposed Ramsar site – at least 320 species of resident and migratory birds inhabit the sanctuary. Migratory birds from Siberia form part of its rich avian fauna. Vulnerable bird species here include the Indian skimmer, sarus crane, Pallas's fish eagle and Indian courser; the pallid harrier and lesser flamingo are near threatened. Winter visitors include black-bellied terns, red-crested pochard, ferruginous pochard and bar-headed goose. Other species include the great thick-knee, the greater flamingo, the Indian darter and the brown hawk owl. But the real star of the show – and the main reason for visiting this stunning area – is of course the extraordinary gharial.