

*A wildlife, culture and outdoor toilet design trip to –*

# India

**3<sup>rd</sup> February to 8<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

Max De Boos, Dave Sheils, Mayette and Steve Anyon-Smith

(joining our group was Sir Giles Scunthorpe, an expert on the world's most dangerous swimming sites and his partner Fifi, who was raised on a farm, and whose agricultural interests are shared by most members of Queensland's Corby family)

*India (n) – A large outdoor toilet facility with a few big cats in it*



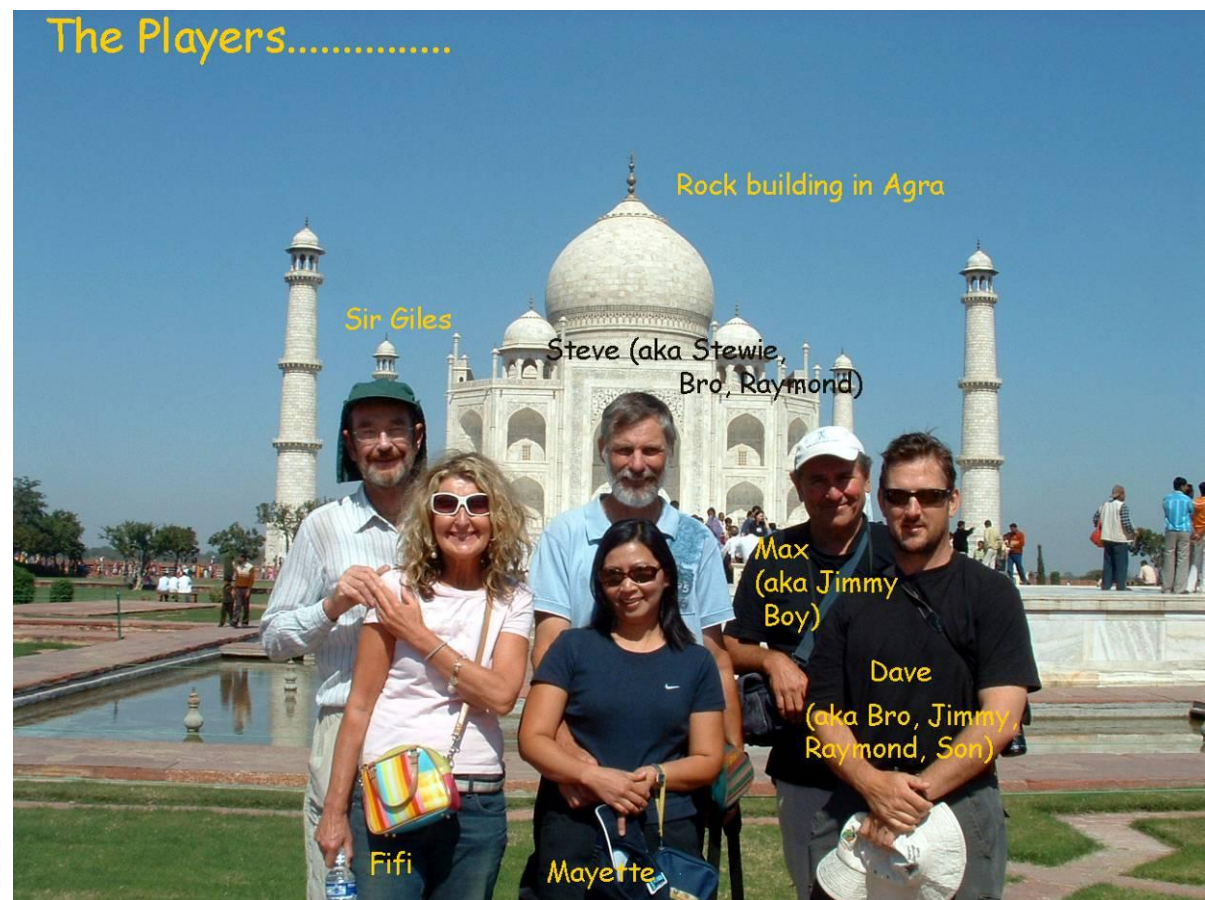
## **The Plan**

My boggy animal has been the tiger. So the plan evolved from my tireless travel mate Dave's desire to test the limits of his stomach and help search for big striped cats and other critters we had missed seeing elsewhere. Given that India is blessed with some awesome historic and architectural wonders it wasn't difficult for Bro Dave and I to interest our partners in joining us. But like most parties there were late changes to attendees and so the mix of participants in our little journey ended up being rather unusual and with a most diverse range of interests. We had interesting times ahead.

Whilst wildlife watching was certainly the most important element of our tour and drove our itinerary to a large extent, many of India's best cultural sites were at or near our preferred wildlife spots so our five week stay had many dedicated cultural days.

We chose to visit in February because this time of year in India coincides with the dry season, the weather is not too hot and over-wintering migratory birds are present.

We chose to use an Indian travel and tour company, Delhi-based Prudent Networks, to organise all the logistic arrangements for our trip (see "Prudent Networks", below).



## **Itinerary (as executed)**

**Mumbai - Ahmedabad - Little Rann of Kutch - Lothal – Gir National Park - Bhavnagar – Velavadar National Park– Mumbai – Jaipur – Ranthambore – Bharatpur – Agra – Khajuraho - Bhandavgarh National Park - Kanha National Park - Pench National Park – Delhi – Corbett National Park - Delhi**

### **Day 01 : Arrive Mumbai**

Assistance on arrival and transfer to Hilton Hotel. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 02 : Mumbai**

Morning excursion to Elephanta Caves. Afternoon city sightseeing tour. Evening transfer to railway station to board Mumbai-Ahmedabad Express at 1935 hrs. Overnight on board.

### **Day 03: Arrive Ahmedabad Wild Ass Sanctuary**

Arrive Ahmedabad at 0510 hrs. Assistance on arrival and drive to Dasada. Drive in the Little Rann of Kutch (Wild Ass Sanctuary) to see the Asiatic Wild Ass and other Fauna. Overnight at the hotel Rann Riders.

### **Day 04 : Little Rann of Kutch**

Full day visit the Little Rann of Kutch for birding and nature watch. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 05 : Little Rann of Kutch**

Full day visit the Little Rann of Kutch for birding and nature watch. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 06 : Little Rann of Kutch - Lothal**

Morning, leave for Palace Utelia near Lothal. Arrive Lothal and check in at Palace Utelia. Visit the Bronze Age archeological site nearby. Afternoon village tour. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 07 : Lothal-Sasangir (Gir National Park)**

Morning, leave for Sasangir. Arrive Sasangir and check in at Lion Safari Camp. Gir national park is the last refuge of the Asiatic Lion. After lunch, jeep drive into the national park. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 08 : Gir National Park**

Visit the park in the morning and evening. Overnight at the hotel

### **Day 09 : Gir National Park**

Visit the park in the morning and evening. Overnight at the hotel

### **Day 10 : Sasangir -Bhavnagar**

Drive to Bhavnagar. Check in at Hotel Nilambagh Palace. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 11 : Bhavnagar**

Excursion to Velavadar National Park (60 kms). Jeep Safari for game viewing. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 12 : Bhavnagar**

Day return excursion to Palitana. At Palitana visit the Jain temples on Setrunjay hills. Return to Bhavnagar for overnight stay. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 13 : Bhavnagar-Mumbai (By Air)**

Morning, transfer to the airport to connect to flight 9W 3412 0915/1025 hrs for Mumbai. On arrival transfer to Hotel Sea Princess. In the afternoon visit the 2000 year old Kanheri Caves. Overnight at the hotel.

### **Day 15 :Mumbai/Jaipur**

Morning, transfer to the airport to connect flight 0525/0700 hrs for Jaipur. Assistance on arrival and transfer to Hilton Hotel. Early afternoon excursion to Amber Fort. Visit pink city and other sites in Jaipur. Overnight at the hotel.

**Day 16: Jaipur/Ranthambore (bloody long way)**

Morning drive to Ranthambore and upon arrival check in at Dev Vilas Resort. Afternoon excursion to Ranthambore Fort. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 17: Ranthambore**

Morning and evening game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 18: Ranthambore/Bharatpur (not quite as long but still long)**

Morning birdwatching around Ranthambore before leaving for Bharatpur and upon arrival check in at Hotel Laxmi Palace. Overnight at the hotel.

**Day 19: Bharatpur**

Visit Keoladeo Ghana NP and other sites for birds outside the park.

**Day 20: Bharatpur/Agra (not far at all)**

Morning drive to Agra enroute visiting Fatehpur Sikri. Upon arrival check in at Grand Imperial Hotel. Afternoon city tour visiting the world famous Taj Mahal, Red Fort etc. Overnight at the hotel.

**Day 21: Agra/ Khajuraho (6 hrs)**

Morning drive to Khajuraho and upon arrival checkin at Hotel Clarks. Afternoon at leisure. City tour visiting the world famous Kamasutra (erotic) temples. Overnight at the Holiday Inn Hotel.

**Day 22: Khajuraho/Bhandavgarh (7 hrs)**

Morning tour visiting the world famous Kamasutra (erotic) temples. Afternoon transfer to Bhandavgarh National Park. Check in Tiger Den Resort.

**Day 23: Bhandavgarh**

Morning and evening jeep ride for game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 24: Bhandavgarh**

Morning and evening jeep ride for game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 25: Bhandavgarh/Kanha/ (5 hrs)**

Morning drive to Kanha National Park. Upon arrival check in at Tuli Tiger Resort. Afternoon game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 26: Kanha**

Morning and evening jeep ride for game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 27: Kanha/Pench National Park (4 hrs)**

Morning jeep safari in Kanha before transferring to Pench. Afternoon jeep ride for game viewing. Overnight at the Pench Jungle Camp.

**Day 28: Pench/Nagpur**

Morning jeep ride for game viewing. Transfer to Nagpur and catch overnight train to Delhi.

**Day 29: Delhi**

Upon arrival check in at The Claridges. Morning shopping. Afternoon visit to Qutb and city tour.

**Day 30: Delhi/Corbett National Park (5 hours)**

Morning drive to Corbett National Park. Upon arrival checkin at Infinity Resort. Evening game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 31: Corbett National Park**

Morning and evening jeep ride for game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

**Day 32: Corbett National Park**

Morning and evening jeep ride for game viewing. Overnight at the resort.

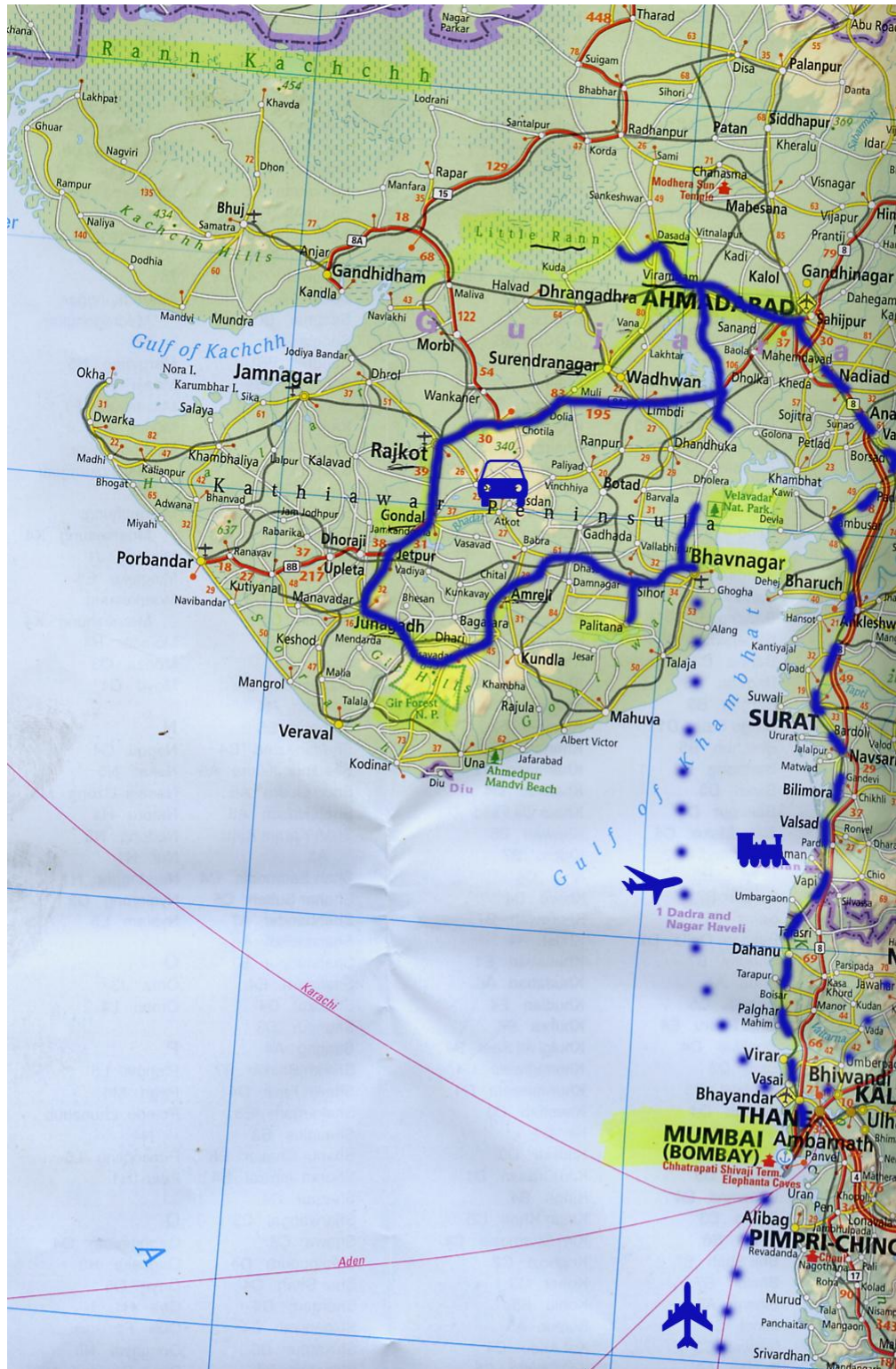
**Day 33: Corbett National Park/Delhi**



Morning jeep ride for game viewing. Afternoon drive to Delhi. Upon arrival check in at The Claridges. Overnight at the hotel.

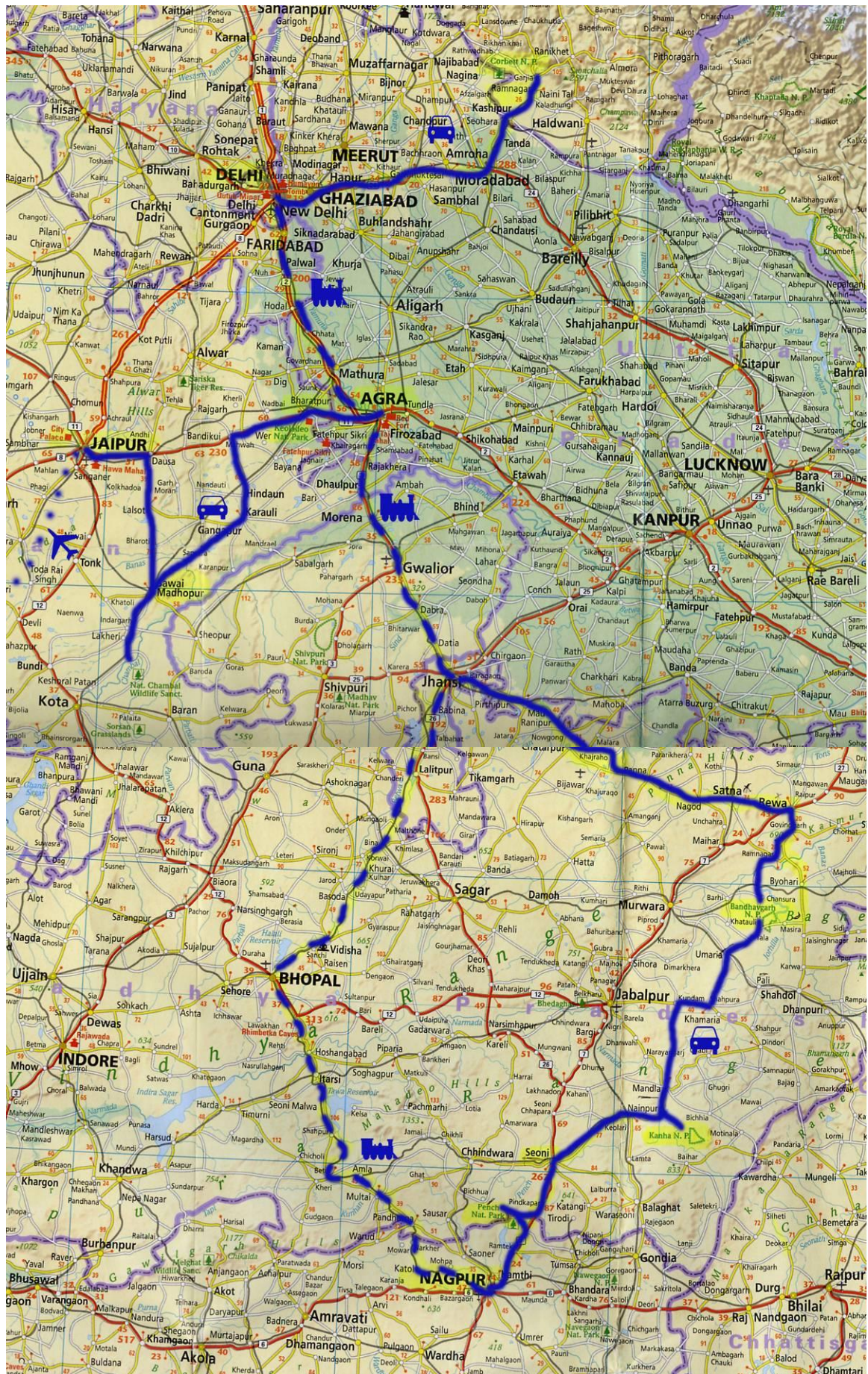
### Day 34: Depart Delhi

Shopping and transfer to International airport to connect onward flight.



Gujarat travels





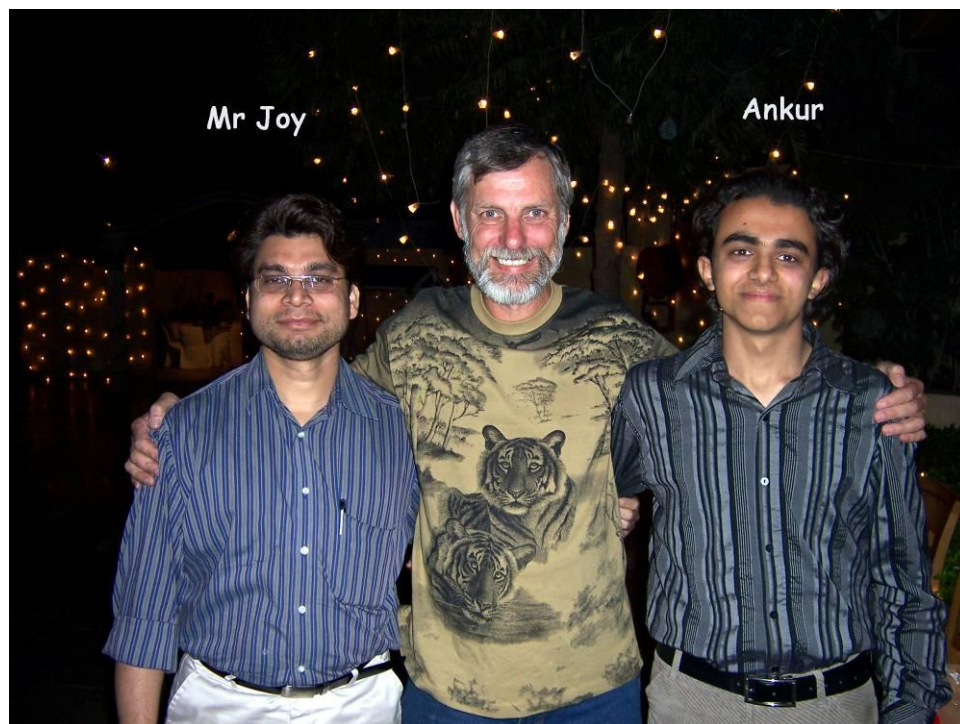


## Prudent Networks

Using public transport to travel between Indian national parks and cultural sites would be possible. Driving a hire car in India would be possible. Sensible people would do things differently. On this occasion we felt like being sensible.

We used the services of Prudent Networks for all our transport, accommodation and guiding needs. Our contact was Mr Joy Mazumdar, the owner of the company, who was the only internet-sourced respondent who quoted us a rate that we could accept. All the others had their hands on their dicks and hoped that they would get someone stupid enough to accept their absurd quotes. Many still contact me offering lower and lower prices. Such is the way business is conducted in India.

Mr Joy is young, keen and flexible. He explained the problems in accommodating our desire for three star accommodation in a region where there is only four star (and up) or else a covered version of the outdoor toilet.



Mr Joy's company is recommended, but there are a few things to keep in mind when dealing with any Indian company:

- They are subject to the challenges provided by the Indian bureaucracy,
- Westerners would think that response times to emails and other correspondence is frustratingly slow,
- Last minute changes to agreements may not always be in the customer's best interests, and
- Unlike many developing countries, the Indian Government doesn't give a toss whether you visit their country or not, so don't expect that the Indian travel industry is too highly regulated.

I pose a simple question: How many Indian lawyers do you know?

Our holiday was wonderful and Prudent Networks can be thanked for their arrangements, their accessibility on tour and the quality of guides, drivers, food and accommodation. Whilst the trip was not without some glitches these were not significant and our ground agent was contactable day or night to sort things out if necessary.

We paid \$US100 per person per day, all-inclusive (except alcohol, domestic airfares and tips).

Joy Mazumdar and his enthusiastic staff can be contacted at [info@prudentnetworks.com](mailto:info@prudentnetworks.com).

## **Indian people**

This is a hard one. The folk employed in the tourism industry were just great. Hotel managers were always welcoming, obliging and often the most knowledgeable folk around. As most wage earners in the tourism sector survive from tipping it is no surprise that these folk were also friendly and service levels were very high.

Shopkeepers could often be relied upon to inflate prices for tourists, often to ridiculous levels. Indian bureaucrats (and I include the banking sector in this) often delighted in wasting our time and theirs, assuming they would acknowledge our existence in the first place.

“Villagers” was the term that our “staff” used to describe those that had to work in the fields. It would have been nice to spend more time poking about in rural areas. Almost without exception those we met when wandering about in paddocks and crops were warm and generous with their time or meager possessions, often inviting us for tea or offering some produce.

Unfortunately wherever white monkeys had been before us, we could rely upon an endless succession of men, women and children pleading for money. Often they would ask us to take their photos so that they could try to extract a fee. Or else they would offer unsolicited and usually useless information, then claim to be a local guide. We became suspicious of anyone who was friendly for more than a few seconds, which was a shame because some may have been genuinely friendly or even deserving of a tip if they went about things in a different way. I take a variety of inexpensive stuffed toys on trips overseas to give to local kids. Just as I would spot a target they would ask for money. Start again.

Indian people near tourist sites, whilst sometimes rather persistent nuisances, were never genuinely threatening, nor did they make Mayette uncomfortable in any way. Indian culture seems to respect women, at least as they walk along the streets.

We were not subjected to racist statements nor did the locals make us feel insecure. In fact coming from Australia probably helped because every male wanted to talk cricket. Knowing the names of a few Indian cricketers helped.

Indians are not aggressive and tolerate behaviour from others that would have the likes of me reaching for a baseball bat. This is probably due to having to deal with the local bureaucracy.





small Indian family on an outing

**Wildlife** (see also notes under “Key Species” at the end of the report)

We could identify 325 different birds and 33 mammals.

We had copies of the *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (Inskipp) and for mammals we relied on previous knowledge, the *Field Guide to the Mammals of the Indian Subcontinent*, local guides and some help from VENT’s guide David Bishop with some of the bats.

As we spent much of our time at cultural sites and almost all the rest in jeeps, our list of little brown birds, especially warblers, was meagre. This is just as well as I can’t identify half of them anyway. Most people can’t, even many who think that they can. David Bishop’s group managed to see many things that we missed, through greater commitment to the task, more skill, better local knowledge and more time looking at them.

Of the **Birds**, the highlights were mainly gained in the semi-deserts of Gujarat. Many European birds were new to me like Eurasian spoonbill, Dalmatian pelican, Eurasian and great thick-knees and lesser flamingo. Local “rarities” here included Syke’s nightjar, rufous-tailed scrub-robin and McQueen’s bustard. We did not search for hypocolius or crab plover.

Bharatpur’s lakes were dry, but we managed a number of greater painted-snipe outside the park. Dusky eagle-owls were nesting within it.

The “tiger reserves” are not the birdiest places in the world and as we paid more attention to mammals in these parks our bird list is deficient.



Corbett was alive with common birds. Unfortunately two ibisbill decamped the week before our arrival and a number of other desirable things eluded us, or else we were too low in elevation, too stupid or otherwise encumbered by matters outside our easy control.

It was good to see that vultures still exist in India, often in large numbers, but only over national parks or mountainous areas. In the lowlands they are virtually wiped out.

Perhaps the second greatest concentration of the one species of bird I have ever seen (after budgies) occurred at the Delhi rubbish tip. As we arrived in the late afternoon from Corbett there were tens of thousands of black kites circling and painting the ground. If there were a hundred thousand of these birds in Delhi I would not be surprised.

**Mammals** were common enough in the national parks, and in Gujarat they were also regularly seen outside of them, but variety was often lacking. We were very happy with the signature mammals of tiger, leopard, wild ass and lion, but I thought we may have picked up a few other odds and sods. If I had seen the ratel that our guide in Gir NP spotted whilst scouting ahead of us, and the hyaena that Max and our guide briefly spied in Velavadar NP then I would have been over the moon!

We managed 22 individual cats (8 tigers, 8 leopards, 2 lions and 4 jungle cats) between us. On leopards we set the Gir NP record for the number of consecutive jeep safaris that included a leopard sighting – the record now stands at four. Other highlights were chinkara, smooth-coated otter, swamp deer and wolves.

I was disappointed to see that little forest remains outside the park system in the areas we visited and I have little hope for what is left with the human population growing so fast. I could not help making comparisons with China and came away with the view



that was quite contrary to my beliefs five years ago..... India has some hard work to do to save its environment. China has a better overall chance.



**Reptiles** – one cobra, a fabulous Indian rock python, gharial and marsh mugger crocodiles, spiny-tailed lizard and various other bits and pieces we could not identify. Even though it didn't feel like it, it was still winter so some reptiles may not have become active during our visit.

**Insects** (annoying) – a few mosquitoes, and all the things that sped up digestion.

**Insects** (not annoying) – many butterflies, but nothing to leave home for.

## **Guides**

I lost count of how many guides we had. Sometimes we had guides provided by Prudent who travelled with us, we almost always had guides at cultural sites and we certainly had a guide every time we jumped into a jeep. At times even the guides had guides. We must have had 25 different ones. Even our drivers had guides. These unfortunates would open doors, sit in the death seat next to the driver, fuss over the endless paperwork at checkpoints and act as a punching bag if the driver got the shifts for any reason.

The quality of the guides varied enormously. The cultural tour guys (yes, no female guides were seen), were sometimes as skilled and personable as guides could get, or else they jumped on a soapbox and endlessly repeated their personal views that history may not have shared. Although to be fair those in the latter category were rare. The natural history guides were a lucky dip. Some knew their sites or parks very well and could locate owl roosts, interesting plants, birds and mammals with ease. And so they should – they do the same circuits twice a day every day in peak periods. Others struggled to know anything – the parks, wildlife or their own name. Sir Giles developed the view that if the guide did not know every bird by call, flight, plumage, age, sex and political persuasion, then that person

was an idiot. For mine I thought that the guides were as skilled as you would expect for someone earning the equivalent of the cost of half a cup of red wine a day plus tips.

We had a few standout chaps with D.D. Mittal at Bharatpur, Pankaj at Ranthambore and Dr. Shiva at Kanha. The contact details of these gents are included here:

D.D. Mittal – [ddmittalknp@rediffmail.com](mailto:ddmittalknp@rediffmail.com)

Pankaj Raghuvansham – [pankajtigerjoshi2003@yahoo.com](mailto:pankajtigerjoshi2003@yahoo.com)

Dr. Shiva Sharnagat – [info@tuligroup.com](mailto:info@tuligroup.com)



## Drivers

We had lots of drivers. Certainly enough to realise that choosing driving as a profession in India is not an option that you would consider lightly. A microsecond's lapse in concentration would result in multicoloured dead things. There are no single vehicle accidents in India as there is no room on the road for them to occur.

I marvelled that drivers could compute all the speeds and trajectories of vehicles, guess all the possible movements of people, and have a keen understanding of the inner thoughts of cows. We managed to hit nothing whilst going in a forward direction, and save for a few rocks and walls nothing in the other direction either.

Only one of our drivers – thankfully one that we had for a few hours only – scared us to the point where we had to interview him en route. This had a minor impact. He later revealed that he had to drive fast or else he would fall asleep. Beware the “day drivers”, the guys you might get for part of a day only. They may not have slept during the year of your tour, such are the ridiculous time and motion demands placed on them by their employers.



Special thanks must go to three of our drivers, Babu in Gujarat, Kuldeep in Rajasthan, and Rakesh in the Delhi – Corbett area. These gents were all with us for several days at least and were superb drivers, friendly guys and unquestioning in our use of their vehicles.



## **National Parks**

There is no doubt that the national parks were well staffed. The management regime, however, was something of a mystery to me. My guess is that most people employed in parks were creating work for each other.

Every park had different rules, different entry requirements, visitation times and sets of fees. Added to this is the bizarre classification of land under park management. There were tourist zones, buffer zones, core zones, sanctuary zones, multi-use zones, national park zones (yes!) and the bits that only poachers could access. Typically the tourist zones were a small percentage of the total area but these areas often had some of the better habitat.

## **Food**

I thought the food was tasty, not too spicy and the servings generous. Most meals consisted of nan and chapatti bread, salad (onion, tomato and radish), rice, vegetables, dhal, and a mildly curried chicken dish. By the end of five weeks the meals had started to repeat themselves rather monotonously but the quality was good. The only red meat dish we saw was mutton (which was generally goat) and the occasional meal of fish. Only brave people ate fish.

The cultural icon known as Delhi Belly is alive and well and I think Dave set the record with an episode that had the Guinness Book people starting to take an interest. Max was a standout in that he admitted to no problems of this nature. His digestive system is a little unusual in terms of its gut fauna and the volume and quality of gases expelled from it. This may have helped him.

## **Indian Bureaucracy**

Entering one of the thoroughly mismanaged national parks might require half an hour or so of paperwork shuffling at the outer entrance gate. Not only might your name, age, passport details and mother's maiden name be required but also the name of your first pet goldfish, your batting and bowling average and whether your life expectancy was sufficient to get you through the buffer zone checkpoint, the inner checkpoint and the random inspections conducted by a guy on a bicycle within the park.

Buying an item of clothing from a government owned department store required these important steps:

1. Identify what you want.
2. Determine what extra taxes and charges apply.
3. Obtain a docket from the salesperson that included the name of the product(s), cost, and other relevant or entirely irrelevant information.
4. Proceed to the payment counter. Here you run a high risk of being ignored. If you wish to pay in USD then get ready for another airing of your passport, spectacles and pen.
5. Go to the delivery counter and hand over paperwork associated with product, payment, identity and a handwritten account of India's chances in the next World Cup.

6. Wait for the purchased items to be retrieved from where you first viewed them. This could take some time.
7. Collect purchased items and proceed to security to have your paperwork checked and punched. It is the paperwork that is punched, unfortunately.

Alternatively, you can purchase an item in this way:

1. Identify what you want.
2. Determine what extra taxes and charges apply.
3. Obtain a docket from the salesperson that includes the name of the product(s), cost, and other relevant or entirely irrelevant information.
4. Proceed to the payment counter and get ignored.
5. Screw up the docket and hurl it at the cashier.
6. Return to the salesperson and apologize for not buying the item(s).
7. Get marched to the store manager's office for some tea and a pleasant chat.
8. The manager arranges all other processes with specially trained staff for just this purpose.
9. Manager hands over purchases.
10. Leave store via security.
11. Cashier gets staff award for upholding a great Indian tradition.

## **Indian Trains**

It has been said that the greatest legacy of the British in India is the rail network. We had three train journeys with two of these being overnights. All trains are government owned and managed. Our trains were relatively new – 20 years or so. Cleanliness is not a feature of Indian trains. If one of the carriage builders had stuck some chewing gum on the wall as a carriage left the factory – it would still be there. Maybe during the monsoon they run the trains into a river somewhere and let them soak for a while in lieu of cleaning them. Honestly they reminded me of Sydney suburban trains they were so dirty. There was evidence that at least one carriage had been cleaned at some stage. The cleaning process involved painting all surfaces the same colour. This included walls, ceilings and ceiling fans.

The trains ran close to time, had airline standard free catering and the sleepers had fresh clean sheets, pillows and a blanket. At least one longish journey should be included in any itinerary just for the experience. Tickets are inexpensive, but should be booked well in advance as all the trains we caught were at capacity. They seemed safe enough.

## **Hotels**

When we asked Prudent for a tour that was at three star hotel standard we ended up with four star (or better). We were told that in many of the places on our itinerary there were no three star hotels, only “no star” or less, or four or more stars. So almost without exception our accommodation exceeded our needs and expectations. Hotels, “resorts” and tented camps were overstaffed, well serviced, and with the exception of the Fawltly Hotels franchised facility that entertained us at Corbett, they were clean and well maintained.



## **Toilets**

India is a very large airy toilet. In the first hour after sunrise, and at sporadic times throughout the day, we were treated to large numbers of folk seemingly randomly crapping everywhere. This necessary and normally private activity was not restricted to the far side of large trees or stone walls, but could be undertaken on railway station platforms, town parks and I would suggest during peak periods, on each others' toes. I visited no structures that were designed as toilets unless they were attached to a hotel, restaurant or major tourist attraction. Many of these were reasonably clean although there was often somebody in residence to extract a small fee for their use.

## **Weather**

The weather was wonderful. We managed ten minutes of rain in five weeks. The mornings could be cool or chilly when in open vehicles "on safari", but by mid-morning the mercury would climb quickly. At no time was it too hot for comfort in the middle of the day nor too cool at other times to survive with more than a jumper and pair of jeans. I guess that on average over the area we covered that the minimum was about 13° and the maximum 28°. The top temps were a tad higher in the desert in Gujarat and lower in Delhi and Corbett.

February / March is an ideal time for travel to India. The peak tourist season is in decline and the weather has not started to get too hot.



## Beer and Wine

TRAVEL ALERT – Gujarat State is dry!!!! This means that if you could find a beer it cost about \$A8.50 for a 650ml bottle. Brute skill and planning had presented Max, Dave and I with four litres of single malt whisky courtesy of Sydney Airport's duty free store so we were okay for the first week.

Alcohol was available in the other Indian states we visited but was not always easy to find or reasonably priced. There were only two breeds of beer – Kingfisher and Hayward's, and as far as I could tell they were very similar, although others held a different view. The price per bottle varied between 40 rupees and 275 rupees. (There were 34 rupees to the Aussie dollar at the time of our visit). A bottle of 700ml Jack was priced at \$A90 (we passed).

Wine is not the first thing on the mind of the average Indian when they wake up in the morning. A skilled Indian carpet weaver earns 70 rupees a day. So after 15 days of work he or she could buy a bottle of Jacob's Creek Cab Sav from a "wine shop". Fifi ordered a bottle from a restaurant one night. After it had been removed from the restaurant safe we signed the necessary paperwork for its official release and stared fixedly at it in our glasses for some time before we dared drink it. It was disappointing to say the least.

India does not have many alcoholics.

## Roads and traffic

The front passenger seat gives the best views and is perhaps the most desirable seat in a vehicle. Not in India. It will bring you one step closer to your God (or Ogd or whatever).



Let's get one thing perfectly clear – hiring a car is totally out of the question. The only comforting aspect to Australians is that Indian drivers often drive on the left hand side of the road. Suicidal drivers (we found a few successful ones) mix with trucks, cars, buses, bicycles, pedestrians, stray dogs and cattle. The cattle are normally more streetwise than their two-legged cousins but occasionally a bucolic cow or so will wander into town and cause mayhem. And the fun part is that this mix is unending in every direction on every road. The worst times are early morning and late afternoon when every road becomes a travelling stock route. Other times are worse too.

A good game to play while being driven around India is called “match the road with the map”. This is great fun because when you have your head buried in a road map you get the chance to miss the manner of your death (unlike 93,000 others each year) and at the same time you can ponder where you might be. Not that the map will always correspond to what's happening on the ground when it comes to road size, condition, surface, volume, travel speed or congestion.

One saving grace for us was that many of our myriad hired vehicles were small 16 seater buses that reached terminal velocity at about 75km/h. If they could have gone quicker they would have. The only road rule was – “give way to bigger things at all times”. The results of any failure to do so could be easily seen and would litter the roadsides for months.

One very positive aspect of the traffic was that all the tuk-tuks and many of the other public transport vehicles ran on compressed natural gas, so particle pollution was very low generally and really only obvious at all in Mumbai. We expected far worse air pollution.



## Scenery



Corbett National Park has scenery. That's about it really.

otherwise enjoy yourself, but not straineously



## **Diary** (text in *italics* is adapted from that supplied by our ground agent)

### **Day 0 – Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2007**

Our kids (Precious and Shit-head) took us to Sydney Airport where at least some of us delighted in the opportunity to buy any two one litre bottles of single malt whiskey for \$A99. This turned out to be more important than usual....

We flew on a Singapore Airlines 747-400 leaving at 1245. We bumped Sir Giles and the sartorially elegant Fifi in the passenger loading dock. Fifi looked like she should have won a prize for something.

The only real pre-departure excitement was some loud banging, screaming and tertiary cussing coming from a men's toilet in the terminal. We thought it might have been a pilot's bonding session.

I found the Sydney – Singapore leg tedious. This was mainly due to the sub-continental gentleman in front of me who had his seat reclined so far back I could count his head lice. He had the habit of wrapping his alcohol-soaked fingers all over my abandoned video screen. I behaved myself.

Changi Airport was up to its normal well-appointed and comfortable standard and our few transit hours were spent easily enough. The 777-300 flight to Mumbai took a little under five hours and lasted forever, arriving just after 2300. Our baggage arrived a mere 90 minutes after we did. Welcome to India.

### **Day 1 – Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

There were literally hundreds of people outside the terminal waving name cards. Our driver, Vijay, saw us before we saw him. Off to the Hilton Tower in a 17-seater bus and Mayette was smiling at the prospect of staying in her first five star hotel. Initially the traffic went nowhere but after the airport precinct logjam our journey was stop-free. This is very different to traffic-free. We collected staff along the way. We had no idea what their respective functions were but they all had mobile phones and were better dressed than we were. They were probably ringing each other to look busy. We weren't sure whether they were local guides, agents, hotel staff or out of work Bollywood actors, as our bus slowly filled.

Check-in at the hotel was slow considering the front desk along with everyone in India had already been sent colour copies of our passport title pages. I expect that India will soon be the Steve Anyon-Smith and Dave Sheils et al capital of the world.

Four hours of sleep and a glorious shower later and we were tucking into a superb breakfast. Max, Dave, Mayette and I then found ourselves promenading along the Indian Ocean shorefront staring at fishing craft, a few gulls and terns and our first boxed set of lounging locals.

Mr Joy, the boss-man of Prudent Networks, our ground agent, met us after our stroll and relieved us of large sums of USD. We had lurking background fears that we



might have just had the most expensive night in a hotel in history should we never see Mr Joy or anybody that knew him ever again. But he handed us an impressive pile of papers in exchange for our \$US20,000 +, so we felt a bit better about the deal.



By mid-morning our first guide, Anil, took us to the Gateway of India and from there to the Elephanta Caves.

**GATEWAY OF INDIA:** *The Gateway of India is one of the main attractions of Mumbai city. It was built to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary for the Delhi Durbar in 1911. Situated at the Apollo Bunder, the gateway holds greater historical significance as the last of the British troops that left India by sea marched through its portals. The monument is complete with four turrets and intricate latticework carved into the yellow basalt stone.*

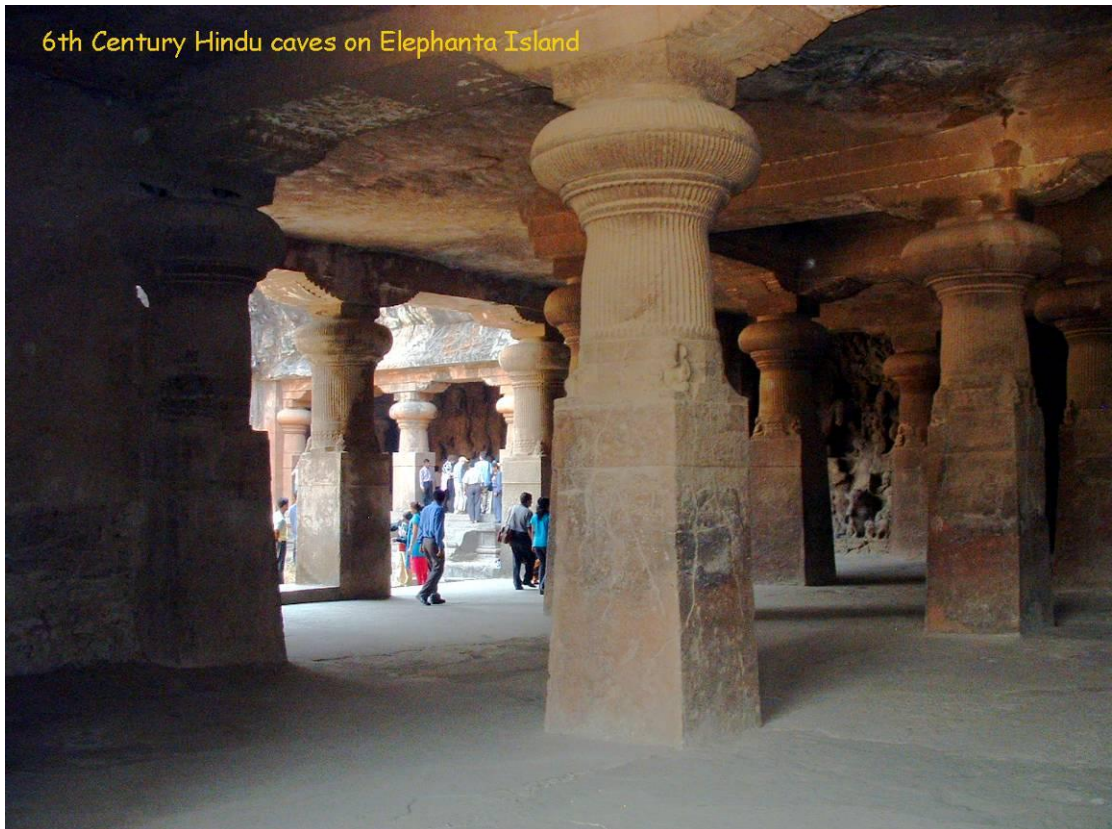
**ELEPHANTA CAVES:** *Located nine kilometres by sea from the Gateway of India, are the Elephanta Caves, rock temples carved out of two hills that emerge from the centre of the island. It is said that the Portuguese named this island after the stone elephant they found here. At Elephanta is the sixth century cave shrine of Lord Shiva, and a massive three-headed sculpture representing Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. Other sculptures foretell the marriage of Shiva and Parvati.*

An informative well-bearded government guide explained the Elephanta Caves to us. We thought they were fantastic, but hey, this was our first temple stop and we had no idea what was ahead of us. Luckily we managed our first mammal tick of the tour with numerous tame bonnet macaques lurking about and stealing stuff.

India Gate, Mumbai



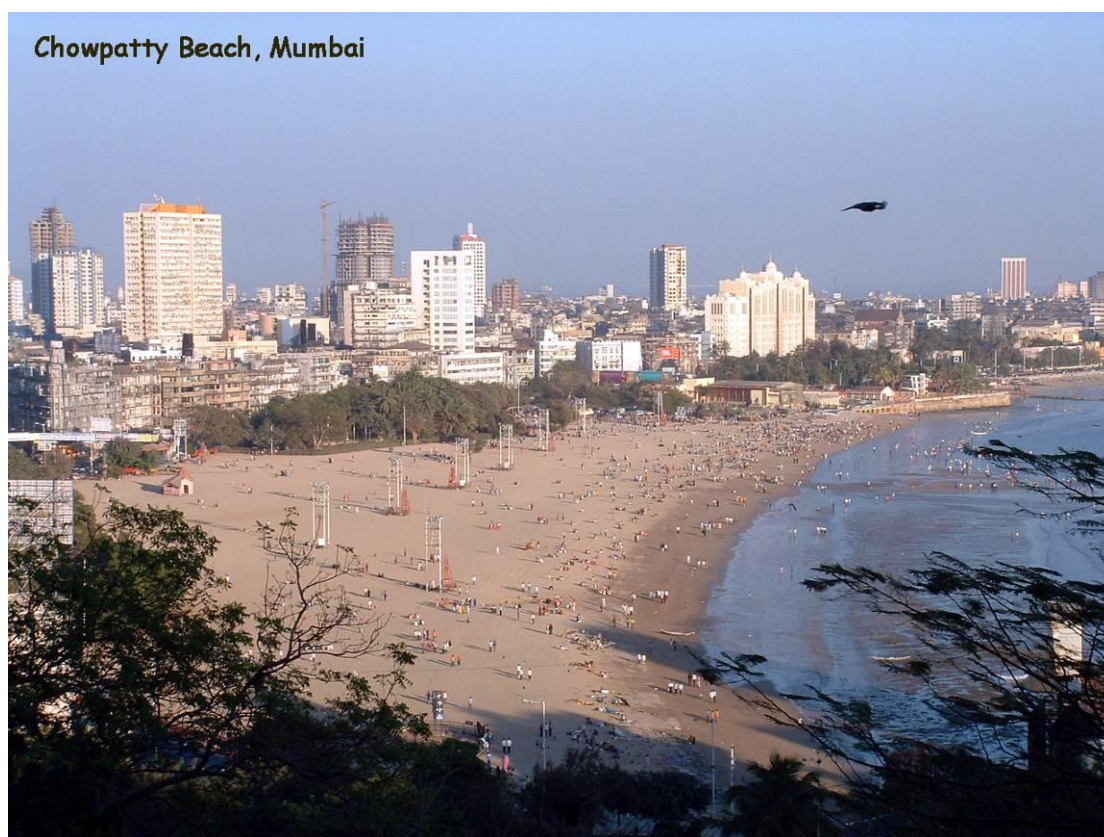
6th Century Hindu caves on Elephanta Island



We lunched on Elephanta Island at a picturesque site overlooking the port of Mumbai and the forested slope of the island. Our bird list was jump-started, even to the extent of my first lifer in the form of purple-rumped sunbird.



On our return to the mainland we found a new guide waiting for us. I was starting to forget their names as their guiding half-life became shorter and shorter. This chap had the comic habit of asking questions and then answering them himself a split second before we could. It became a game that kept us awake. His guiding patch took in the Hanging Gardens (ergh), Chowpatty Beach (hmmm), where the rich buggers live (yuck), and finally some very impressive British-built sandstone buildings within Bombay University and elsewhere. As Bro Dave was heard to say – “the Poms certainly didn’t think they were ever leaving”.



We paid a lightning visit to our ex-hotel to grab our bags and then hare off in the direction of an alcohol-free restaurant. We enjoyed an equally frantic sprint to the railway station so we could catch the overnight express train to Ahmedabad in the western State of Gujarat.

Our train was almost long enough to reach the next stop whilst still parked in Mumbai. Our particular car was labeled “3 Tier A/C Sleeper”. This meant we were stacked three high, there was some form of air conditioning and it was not unknown for people to try to sleep. Mayette was a bit pissed off with train things but calmed eventually. Sir Giles was doing his best to set a record for irritating people with his constant singing of christmas carols and old Mongol war chants. I slept.

## **Day 2 – Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

Mayette woke me at 0500 to mention that the train was about to arrive at Ahmedabad. Our arrival coincided with a slight problem. There was nobody there to meet us. Large Indian railway stations do not always have visible meeting points so we gathered at a relatively secure location clear of any material normally deposited in toilets and waited. Exploratory parties were sent at different intervals to search for people searching for us but these met

with no success and generally added a layer of confusion and frustration. Sir Giles and Fifi amused the locals with their impersonations of real people.

When we discovered our rather laconic and wobble-headed driver Babu, he had been waiting for us for an hour in one of the railway station car parks.

We soon settled into our small but comfortable bus and bounced in the direction of Desada, on the edge of the semi-desert known as The Little Rann of Kutch. Two aspects of this journey are noteworthy. Firstly, there was a profusion of large birds, even in and around towns and villages. There were flocks large and small going in all directions. There were cranes, storks, ducks, ibis, geese, egrets, doves and everything else that called Gujarat home. The biomass was amazing. We were to learn that no bird is deliberately harmed in Gujarat.

The other noteworthy aspect was that Fifi had “run-off-at-mouth disease”. This condition manifests itself in a continuous translation of what the eye is seeing. “Oh, Sir Giles, a tree, Laksmi Bank welcomes us, poor people, a tree, that girl’s having a wee”, etc etc.

Our digs at Desada, the Rann Riders, was well away from the nearest village and situated across the road from a large lake. The lake and its surrounds were crawling with birds. Sarus cranes had a chick, the sandgrouse came to drink, ducks competed with other waterfowl, turtles and domestic stock for space and by the end of the second day we had seen 111 birds (22 of which were new for me). Also seen were many nilgai, a rufous-tailed hare and a grey mongoose. And we hadn’t been near a park yet!



The afternoon saw us visit an enormous lake. We could not see the end of it for two reasons: curvature of the earth, and the number of birds in the way. I’ve seen a few bird-



filled lakes in my time but nothing on this scale with the lake containing the largest concentration of waterfowl that I have witnessed. Even Sir Giles agreed. I counted over 700 demoiselle cranes in addition to common cranes, spoonbills, white and Dalmatian pelicans, cormorants, gulls, terns, waders by the truckload, egrets, moorhens, swampheens, crakes and thousands of ducks – so many in fact that it was almost impossible to sort through them and communicate to others what you had seen. At dusk around 100 harriers added a level of confusion and spectacle.



We spotlighted back to Rann Riders scoring a Syke's nightjar and a little owl, but had no luck with mammals.

Wonderful food completed an exhausting but exciting day.

### **Day 3 – Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

After breakfast we drove to the Wild Ass Sanctuary. Max was shocked and disappointed that wild ass were an animal with four legs.

**LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH:** *The Little Rann of Kutch (also known as the "Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary") is a fairly featureless expanse of flat land - the old sea bed - dotted with islands known as "Bets" which form the core for the flora and fauna. This is the largest wildlife sanctuary in India.*

*In the Little Rann of Kutch, the asses are attracted by the coarse grasses that spring up in the monsoon. With the advent of summer, the asses move to bets in which there is a perennial supply of water and grass.*

the Little Rann of Kutch



We had wild ass a-plenty within a few minutes of “entering” the sanctuary. The entry was not obvious and we saw no park officials or any other evidence that the reserve was any different to the area that surrounded it. McQueen’s bustard was a nice addition to the bird list but the large flocks of common cranes were the birding highlight for mine. At one point a flock of 140 rose into the air as we walked.

We returned to camp and had time to poke around the adjacent fields before lunch. An old man with coke-bottle spectacles intercepted us and insisted we eat some of his meager chick-pea crop. These he tore out by the roots and wasn’t happy until we started shelling and eating the peas. A lovely and generous man.

Near the lodge a large family of nilgai was wandering through the fields. An impressive-looking chap and president of the local chapter of the nilgai-moving-on committee made sure that his crops weren’t next on the menu for these large antelope by shooin the beasts into next door.

Lunch included the surprise addition of large cans of cold beer courtesy of the Rann Riders manager who had just returned from somewhere not very close by.

We found ourselves the owners of a few extra rolls of camera film. This came about after a little misunderstanding when we tried to pay our national park camera fees. It transpired that there were no camera fees. The local guide was just being a little enterprising.





A late afternoon excursion saw us back in the wild ass reserve. This visit was to an area where lesser flamingoes and other waterbirds abounded. We added greater adjutant (surprisingly) to our list but we could have used much more time to sort through the wet chooks. Aside from more wild ass (you can never get enough wild ass), we stumbled onto a mixed herd of blackbuck and chinkara (Indian gazelle). They were exceptionally shy, with

the guide asking us not to talk in the jeep even though the animals were about a kilometer away. Fifi commented on how tame they were. We made a mental note to replace our babel fish.

In the late afternoon gloom a large group of wild boar crossed the main road in front of us. They were still crossing when a truck slammed into them, splattering one of their number.

The day's events ensured that a Talisker (or two) before bed were not wasted.



#### **Day 4 – Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

The day started in confusion. Our printed program told us we were staying in a town named Gondal. Oddly it also had us staying in accommodation called “Palace Utelia”. There was only one tiny problem – Palace Utelia was over 200 kilometres from Gondal. We rang the said palace and yes, they confirmed our booking in it. So off we went.



Palace Utelia was built in 1882. It sits on top of a small hill and is out of all proportion to the village that surrounds it. The earthquake that hit Gujarat in 2002(?) did the palace no favours with bits falling off, apart and into one another. The charming owner of the building, the village and everyone in it gave us a tour of a building that redefines the real estate speak that a property “needs work”. Our rooms were restored unlike most of the rest of the place.



Our new host suggested we visit the nearby Bronze Age Harappan settlement of Lothal. The site was finally abandoned around 1700BC so you could say it wasn't new. It was a fascinating place. The adjacent museum was interesting and we were given an expert tour and commentary from a visiting Italian archeologist. This Italian Indiana Jones was insightful, entertaining and according to one of our number, sexy.



Lunch was taken in the palace courtyard. Afterwards we were toured around the village, which was culturally interesting and very pleasant. All the loyal subjects were on their best behavior lest their feudal owner roughly cast them into the palace dungeon. We were in and out of modest homes, kissing babies and the more attractive of the farm animals while dodging gifts of food and drink. Our village tour even had adult public nudity as we took in the womens' thermal bathhouse.







The evening's activities were a little less structured. We were surprised that the palace served beer. They didn't tell us the cost and we were too silly to ask (\$A8.50 per 650ml bottle). One of our number (clue: not either of the Jimmies, Mayette, Sir Giles or me) attained a level of relaxation that caused her to try to (words deleted here by order of my wife) to more than one of her travel group, a table, a tiger that had been shot by the Maharajah of Bhavnagar in 1936, and the floor of her bedroom, after she was sent there by the palace staff. She offered me, unsolicited, a short personality profile, which resulted in me learning nothing at all. Just 30 days to go.....

#### **Day 5 – Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

I was waltzed around a mountain of paperwork as we settled our exorbitant account with a person who clearly loved her job – the palace owner's unsmiling mother.

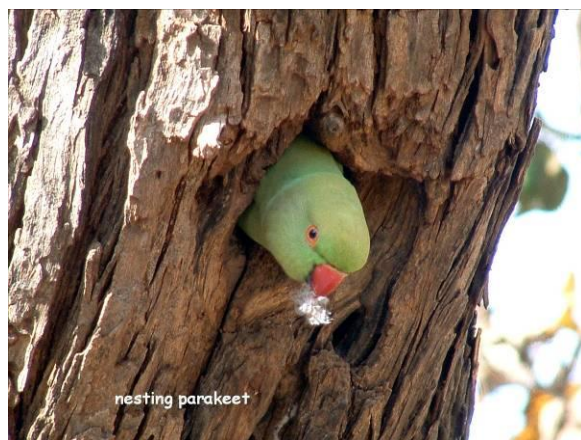
We left for Gir National Park with the bus eerily quiet for a change. Much of the route was tollway but as our bus's top speed was 70km/h, progress was slow, but thankfully not all that dangerous! The only site of any real interest was the ancient city of Junagadh, where a number of truly remarkable stone buildings were seen. We really should have stopped but we were running late, and with at least two of our number inclined to disappear when not supervised, we kept going.

***Gir National Park*** is the last refuge of the Asiatic Lion. The national park and Lion Sanctuary in the Kathiawad peninsula of Gujarat has the distinction of being the last earthly refuge of the majestic Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo*). It is home of some 300 lions of this close to being extinct Asiatic species. Apart from the Asiatic Lions, the park is also home to large number of chitals, chinkara, leopard, wild ass and many other animals. The Asiatic lion once ranged from Asia Minor and Arabia through Persia to India. Before British and other hunting, it roamed throughout the northern and central states of India, from Sindh to Bengal and southward to the Narmada basin. In 1884, the species was finally wiped out from everywhere save the Gir forest.

We checked into our well-appointed safari tents in the Lion Safari Camp in time for our afternoon jeep safari to the park. The highlight was sighting three leopards very close to the road. Other mammals included chital, sambar, wild boar and langur monkeys. But alas we saw no lions. Most of the time whilst on safari in India we traveled in two jeeps. On this safari Mayette was traveling with Sir Giles and Fifi. She was having such a good time that she leapt from their vehicle at the “three leopards site” and joined the rest of us in the other jeep. What the leopards thought about this maneuver is unknown.

### **Day 6 – Friday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

We were all up at 0530 and back into the national park at first light. Our guide was of Ugandan heritage and although we had stunning views of an adult male leopard, again we saw no lions. Other groups had seen some so they were about. Common mongoose was added to the same run of mammals seen from the previous day’s safari.



nesting parakeet



Indian grey mongoose

Before and after lunch we had some free time to wander along the river at the front of the tented camp and into some extensive adjacent forest. There were good numbers of birds.

Our hosts reminded Sir Giles and Fifi that they were not to bring their own drinks to the restaurant. We will never know whether their apparent inability to understand these simple instructions led to the mass outbreak of food poisoning in our group the next day – but as a theory it stands up.

The afternoon safari produced yet another male leopard. It turned and stared at us before loping off. Inexplicably Sir Giles missed seeing it.

The safari was getting long in the tooth when we passed a park staff outpost. Our guide asked them if they had seen any lions and they agreed that there were two just metres from the outpost’s fence. These clowns did not volunteer this information – we had to ask. Anyway we were happy. We had our Asiatic lions – a mother and a two year old cub - so we could relax a little. The lions didn’t have much on at the time, with one or the other raising its head at intervals before nodding off. We had also set the park record for consecutive leopard sightings (three). A pair of painted sandgrouse just metres away from the road proved there were still new things for us to see.

I stole away to the Jimmy Boys’ tent for a de-briefing. Oh, and a whisky too, from memory.





### **Day 7 – Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

Those of us that could still look at food had a coffee before going back into the park. Our guide scouted ahead at one point and managed to see a ratel. By the time we got close it had gone into the core area of the park, which was reserved for poachers I think. Nobody else could go there. So disappointment came our way. On our return we found another male leopard at a kill. We had close and prolonged views before it wandered off in no great hurry. This extended the park consecutive leopard sighting record to four. We were told so many times that lions were easy to see and leopards were quite rare.

After our late breakfast I wandered the hills but without much luck. Dave and Mayette were out for the count with stomach issues and they and Sir Giles were missing at the lunch table.

The afternoon safari was relatively boring. Sir Giles and Fifi were the most interesting things seen.

Max and I were now the only ones with stomachs intact.

### **Day 8 – Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

Our next destination was Bhavnagar and all our map reading guesses for getting there were shattered when Babu displayed some local knowledge and took us initially through one side of the park and then along roads that we had trouble following on the map. Our first pair of jackals were seen at the edge of the park along with better views of chinkara and then a large covey of jungle bush-quail sunning themselves on the side of the road.

We arrived at Bhavnagar a little before 1300. Bhavnagar is a coastal city but we never quite made it to the coast. It is an incredibly grotty place, in stark contrast to our accommodation, the Nilambag Palace. Built in 1859 it was the local maharajah's palace until 1984. Our bedroom (once the maharajah's) was 24 feet by 20 feet in area + monster bathroom and balconies. Mayette couldn't believe her eyes. The room contained original furniture and artwork, but with rather too many tiger and leopard heads for my taste. I became better friends with the bathroom as the day progressed. Oh well, I lasted eight days, that's something. Only Max to go.

I skipped dinner.





## Day 9 – Monday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2007

Our day trip to Velavadar was much anticipated. I packed dunny wrap, sucked slowly on a lolly and crossed my fingers that I didn't turn inside out.

**Velavadar National Park** is a unique grassland ecosystem that has attracted fame for the successful conservation of the Blackbuck, the wolf and the lesser florican. Once found in open plains throughout the country, the blackbuck's largest population occurs in this park. The park is spread over an area of 35 sq.kms, its grassland, the greenery and the quadrupeds are visible as far as the eye can see. The park has more than 1,000 Black Buck that can be viewed on the open grassland from very close range. It has ringed horns that have a spiral twist of three to four turns and are up to 70 cm long. The body's upper parts are black and the underparts & the ring around the eyes are white. The light brown female is usually hornless.

The fastest of the Indian Antelopes, they move-off in a series amazing leaps and bounds when threatened, and then break into a lightning run. The wolf and the jackals are the main predators in the park. Wolves here use shrub land for lying, dining and for rendezvous and depend on blackbuck, hare and other small animals as their prey.

Another rare sight is that of the lesser Florican, which migrate and settle here to breed in the grasslands. After arrival, the male bird marks the territory and displays to attract the female. The courtship display of the male is a spectacular vertical leap up to a height of two meters and may display over 500 times in a day! Velavadar is also an excellent place to see a large number of harriers. The park is very rich in other birdlife as well.

We arrived at Velavadar National Park at 0715, then entertained a twenty minute screaming match between the park "officials" and Babu and me. Prudent had not prepaid any entry or other fees so we had to cough up and hope to be reimbursed later. For some bizarre reason it cost more to visit one of the least visited parks in India than any of the others. Further, they extorted money for all sorts of things for which we didn't need to pay. We ended up paying about \$US78 for a visit that lasted 75 minutes, but I am getting ahead of myself here.



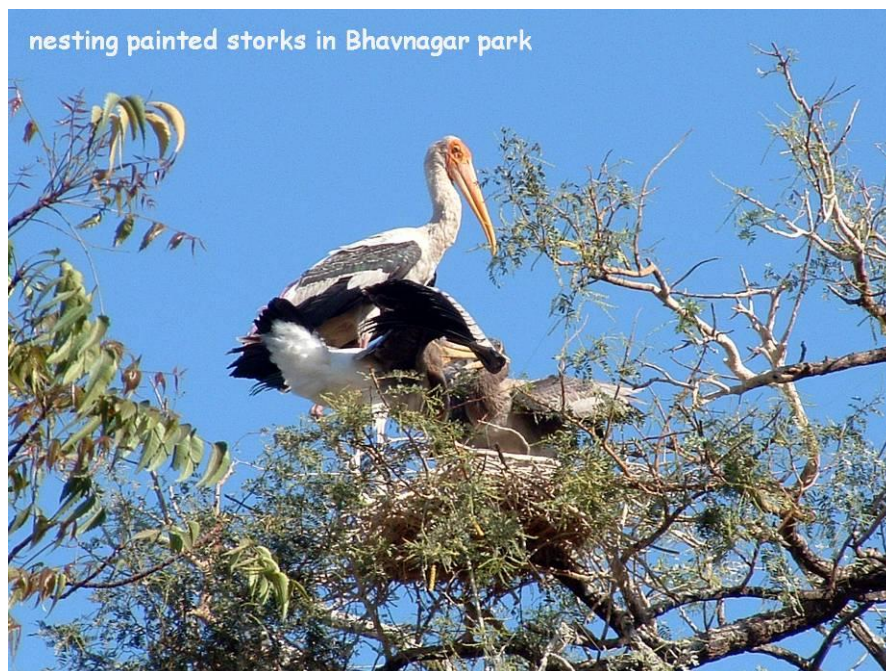
Our compulsory but thoroughly useless guide jumped in our bus and off we went. This park is also known as Blackbuck National Park on account of very large herds of this beautiful animal. The first bit of excitement was when Max and the guide sighted a small group of striped hyaena. The rest of us climbed onto the roof of the bus but we failed to locate them. A few minutes later I spotted an animal with sharp teeth slink into an isolated patch of grass next to the road. We directed Max to the site on foot while we sensibly stayed on the roof of the bus (this is why it is always good to travel with people who are relatively new to wildlife watching). Max could see no sign of a mammal until he was less than a metre from the prostrate jungle cat, which then bolted, but giving open views as it did so.

Not five minutes later we found three wolves hunting blackbuck. The blackbuck herd included a stunning albino male.

Although we had paid for a four hour safari the guide announced after 75 minutes that the tour had ended and that was it. Pig's arse it was. So we went back into the park for another 45 minutes, after which time the park had been apparently been abandoned by the rest of the staff. We determined that we could have a better experience walking along the public main road that bisects the park. So that's what we did, picking up a few birds and another wolf in the process.

I would certainly highly recommend Velavadar, but get ready for the run-around by the idiots in charge of the place. Much wildlife can be easily seen from the road that runs through it and you would not have to pay for this option.

Lunch was at Bhavnagar. The Jimmies, Mayette and I wandered the town, exchanging money, marveling at the number of painted storks nesting in a city park and generally avoiding being killed by the traffic, crushed by wandering cattle or having our kidneys stolen.





## Day 10 – Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2007

Another early start for our eagerly anticipated visit to the Jain Temples at Palitana. The hill on which the temples are located requires a climb that ascends 3600 steps. Although we were all afflicted by stomach and/or other ills each of us managed to get to the top. I was proud of Mayette. Much of the time she chatted with pilgrims to take her mind off the physical bits.



Although the Taj Mahal is much more beautiful than the Jain temples (and possibly any other building), what you see is what you get with the Taj. It really does look like the postcards. The Jain temples on the other hand provide for more personal experiences. I found them fascinating, complicated and much more human than the Taj. I think we all agreed that they came second on our list of cultural sites of interest.

As the Jains kill nothing – even to the extent of masking their mouths against the involuntary inhalation of microscopic insects – there were quite a few good birds to be seen on the rocky vegetated slopes of the hillside. Sir Giles missed seeing many of these in his manic pursuit of getting to get to the top of the hill first. Kids and old codgers, you can't tell them anything.

*Amongst all the **Jain temples**, Palitana temples are considered to be the most sacred. Located on Shetrunjaya hills there are 863 exquisitely carved temples. No one is allowed to sleep overnight including the priest, because the temple city has been built as an abode for the Gods. It is also one of the greatest tourist attractions in Gujarat for foreign tourists.*

*The act of ascending a path to reach a place of pilgrimage is a part of the Hindu and Jain consciousness, which is why many of their holiest temples are located along hills and mountain ranges. The Jains have five separate hill locations for their holiest*

*clusters of temples and Shatrunjaya Hill, Palitana is considered the most important among them. Another group is in Junagadh, not too far away, while others are in Rajasthan and Maharashtra.*

*Palitana houses perhaps the largest cluster of Jain temples anywhere. These temples were built in two phases-the 11th and 12th centuries as a part of the resurgence of temple building all over India, and in the 16th century. Some of the earliest temples built in the 11th century were destroyed by Muslim invaders in the 14th and 15th centuries. The current temples date back to 16th century onwards. Not any one person or group was responsible for the construction of these magnificent temples. It was the effort of the wealthy businessmen who were followers of Jainism that these buildings came into existence.*



but wait.....







Dinner was enjoyed in the palace garden.

**Day 11 - Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

At breakfast Fifi made the remarkable statement that if she were declared brain-dead she was not to be revived. Dr Who would have struggled with a reply. I can picture Tom Baker strangling himself with his scarf.

We negotiated the convoluted hotel check-out procedure and faithful Babu delivered us reasonably intact to the Bhavnagar Airport for our flight to Mumbai. Babu was very fond of the bus's horn, and as a parting gesture he entertained us by playing tunes on it.

We had a feeling that something was not right when the airport road became unsealed but our worst fears were not realised. The Jet Airways check-in was slick, the aircraft modern and the 737-800 departed and landed earlier than scheduled.

There was nobody at Mumbai Airport to meet us but we had grown to expect that sort of possibility. Eventually a Sea Princess Hotel limo arrived with instructions to pick up just two passengers. The nice man promised to use only the finest surgical steel and get a good price for the body parts of those that were to wait for another vehicle in "five minutes".



The only truly awful meal of the holiday was endured in the restaurant at the Sea Princess. We were mushroomed by Prudent's local agent in terms of what was happening and we figured that we had to eat, so Mayette and I ordered burgers and chips and real coffee. The food was so bad that I thought I was back in the USA at a roadside diner. The coffee wasn't much different either.

The seafront outside the hotel was surprisingly clean and sandy and by late afternoon it was well stocked with happy people.

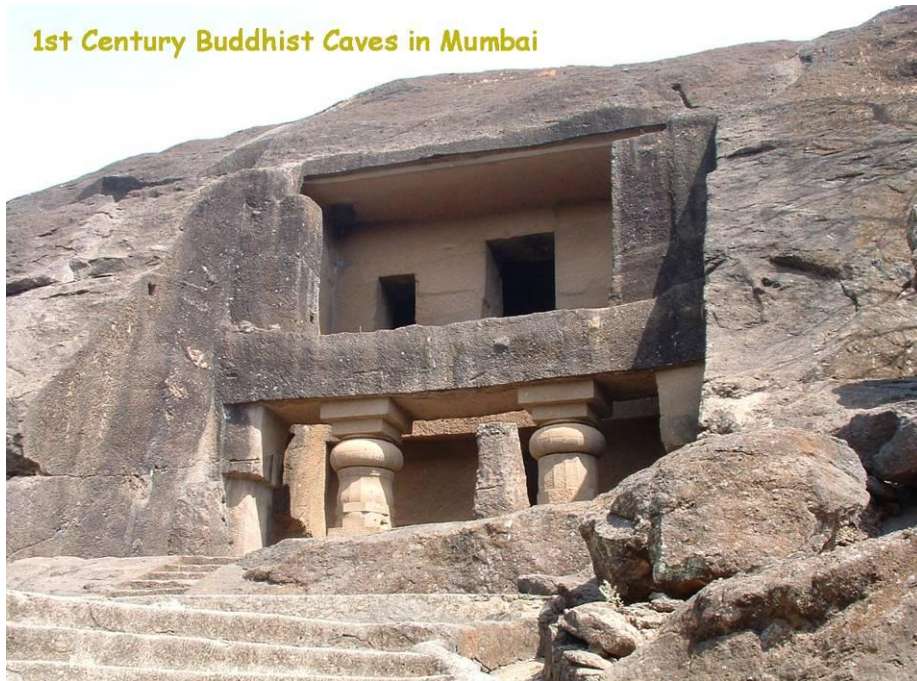
After lunch we were picked up and taken to Sanjay Gandhi National Park, which is located very close to the centre of Mumbai City. This park is full of good forest, deer, monkeys, a healthy population of leopards and the 2000 year old Buddhist Kanheri Caves. These were very accessible, simply stunning and not to be missed. Raju, our local guide, made the visit more interesting by his expert commentary. The caves are scattered over a monolithic hillside. The rock carvings were exquisite. I could have spent the whole day there, looking



at the historic and the natural. I am guessing that a great diversity of birds could have been seen if we had more time.

**KANHERI CAVES:** *Rock-cut structures are one of the most primitive forms of architecture found in several parts of India. The Kanheri Caves in Maharashtra are one of the finest examples of this architectural style. The Caves are located high in the surrounding hills. A narrow winding path, leads up to them. Built by Buddhist monks, the caves are in keeping with the Buddhist ideas of simplicity. The caves are characterised by many halls and a huge stone stupa along with the 2000-year-old teak wood ceiling, which is still intact. Outside the cave is a pillar crowned with lions. This was an emblem of the Buddhist King Ashoka, now adopted by the Indian Government as the state emblem.*

1st Century Buddhist Caves in Mumbai



Mayette and I passed on the “lion and tiger safari tour”, which I understand was little more than a drive past some open-air cages. So we added quite a few birds to our trip list as we ducked and weaved between restrained Indian lovers in the parkland outside the “big pussy in cage” place.

Beers beside the hotel pool adjacent to the beach were enjoyed before a lovely meal at a restaurant across the road. The hotel is located in the ritzy Bollywood strip so there was no shortage of places to eat.



## Day 12 – Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2007

Our wake-up call was for 0245. We caught a Jet Airways 737-800 flight to Jaipur, arriving a tad late but this didn't really matter as there was nobody to receive us when we got there. This surprised nobody but it made little difference because when we finally arrived at the very swish Jaipur Hilton it took over an hour to check in. So much for the early start.

It was late morning as the last available elephants plodded us up the incline to the Amber Fort on the outskirts of Jaipur. Our beast was a sad and tired 50 year old female. Looking at her I could have believed she was acquainted with Hannibal. Hey, wait on, I'm 50.

**AMBER FORT:** *The Amber Fort in Rajasthan was built in 1592 by Raja Man Singh, and is one of the finest examples of Rajput architecture. Perched high on a barren ridge, it commands extensive views over a deep narrow valley and the wider plains beyond. The building was finally completed in the early 18th century when the threat of Mughal domination was receding. From the 16th century up to the foundation of Jaipur in 1727 the Rajputs, both for defensive purposes and as a residence, used the Amber Fort. Thus behind the mighty walls you'll find charming gardens and*



*magnificent palaces made from marble and precious stones, richly decorated with elaborate stoneworks and paintings, representing royal splendor and luxury. Guests have the chance to ride an elephant up to the entry gates.*

Our guide was the font of all wisdom when it came to his special subject – Local Amber Forts of the Jaipur Region. He patiently answered a torrent of stupid questions from one of our party. The Fort was something else, of course. The scale, majesty and sheer effort that would have been required to build the thing made me wonder about India in 2007.

**Amber Fort, 1592**







The “Pink City of Jaipur” was visited after lunch. This must have been good because the photos look nice but we were starting to suffer temple / fort malady and having serious trouble absorbing new information.

I decided that my immediate future lay within the realms of single malt whisky. Max and Dave agreed.

An open-air restaurant resplendent with colourful all-singing and all-dancing local women was made all the more interesting (and safe) by Mayette’s non-attendance.





### Day 13 – Friday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2007

Our next destination was Ranthambore National Park. It was exciting to be going to our first tiger reserve. The journey took rather longer than it should have with Sir Giles and Fifi obsessed with roadside “chi” (tea) stops.

***Ranthambore National Park*** is in the Sawai Madhopur District of Rajasthan state. This is one of the finest places to view animals, especially as they are used to being stared at here. The park covers an area of Approximately 400 sq Km and if combined it with the area of Sawai Man Singh sanctuary area, it is around 500 Sq km. Ranthambore National Park was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1957 and in 1974 it gained the protection of "Project Tiger". It got its status as a National Park in 1981.

*There are many water bodies located all over the park, which provide relief during the extremely hot summer months for the forest inhabitants. A huge fort dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, after which the park is named, towers over the park atop a hill. There are many ruins of bygone eras scattered all over the jungle, which give it a unique, wonderful and mixed flavour of nature, history and wildlife. Tigers at Ranthambore have been known to even hunt in full view of human visitors, due to their lack of fear of human presence in vehicles.*

The Dev Vilas Hotel was wonderful. Mr Balendu Singh, the owner and host was the most affable and informed person we met on our holiday. He gave a potted history of wildlife conservation in Ranthambore and elsewhere. I particularly enjoyed his response to the question of whether we would see a tiger – “fair”, he said. When we explained that we were going to Bandhavgarh he changed his answer to “very fair”. He made us laugh when he told us of the Kaziranga National Park warden who had a collection of dead poacher images displayed where others may have kept their severed animal heads.





Permits for visits to Ranthambore were scarce, with large numbers of domestic tourists competing for slots. The system that operates for jeep safaris is frustrating. Vehicles were randomly allocated a set trail from which they could not deviate. As some of the trails were good for tigers and others pretty hopeless, it was a matter of luck. We were allowed to visit the fort area in the afternoon, which is outside the core safari area. Although impressive and accessible we were starting to get a little blasé with forts.

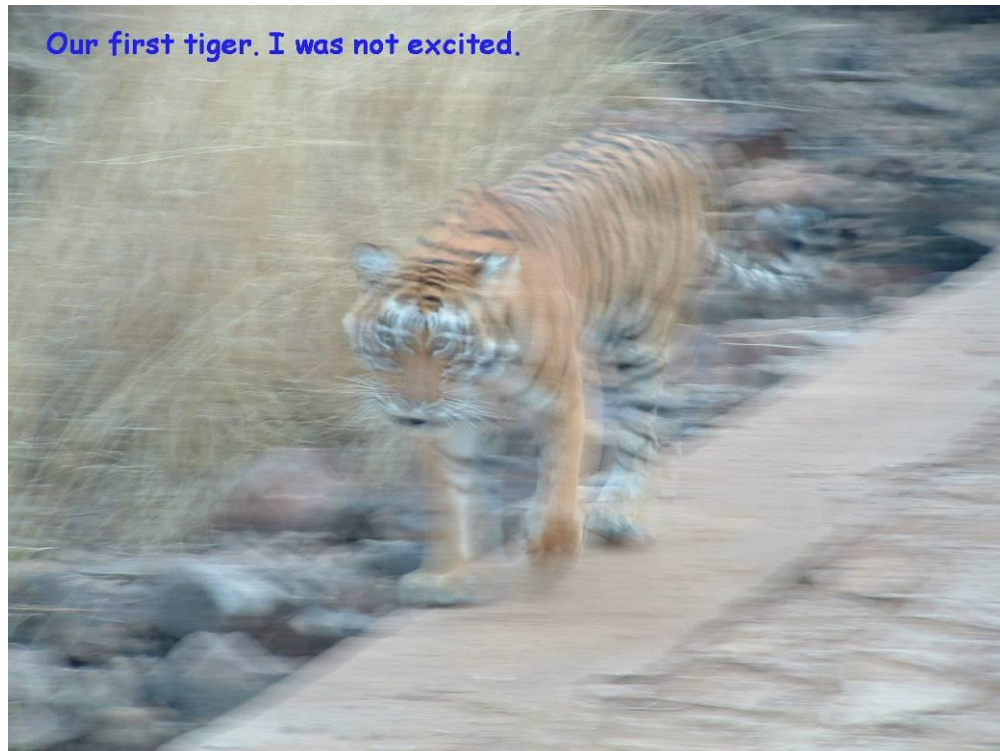
The number of langur monkeys was truly amazing. One had been killed by one of India's burgeoning numbers of feral dogs. The other monkeys just stared. Dogs have replaced vultures over vast areas of India as the prime scavengers. The downside to this is that if there is no carrion the dogs create some by killing things, including village children, whereas the vultures do not. The cultural ethic of not harming animals will be sorely tested soon methinks. Although if the people do nothing it may have a beneficial effect population growth.





### **Day 14 – Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

Our guide for the morning safari, Pankaj, had 21 years of experience in Corbett. Within 15 minutes he was our newest best friend as we were staring at a two year old female tiger as it strolled around a corner toward us and then alongside our vehicle, totally ignoring us. A few seconds later and we would have run into it. FANTASTIC. Relaxed now! We searched for others and aside from some loud roaring we saw no more, but we didn't care too much!





We returned for breakfast and then used the opportunity to roam “by leg” around ancient hills dotted with forts, mausoleums and earthworks with the odd live bird here and there. We watched our first red-headed vultures at close range and flushed numerous painted sandgrouse. Local kids were a pain in the arse as they followed us about demanding money. Mayette was getting testy with one youth but forbade me from giving him some instruction. I was ready to provide a practical demonstration of fist on head.

Our afternoon safari ballot result was miserable and although we saw no tigers we had a leopard run in front of our jeep and then wander up a hill, giving superlative views.

Beers were enjoyed. We had bought these in the nearest town before we checked in. The hotel manager even gave us some ice despite the fact that we were eroding his business by not buying them from him. That’s service!





### **Day 15 – Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

Ranthambore Roulette had the added buggerance factor of a trainload of an arriving trainload rich dudes and many extra jeeps. Pankaj suggested a place where every known unseen bird in the universe holed up on such occasions. The site description had caused foam to run from my mouth and down my shirt. The distance quoted to get to this bird Eden was 35 kilometres. A previously undocumented law that dictates that the closer you get to the quoted distance the further you have to travel, took over. After 60 kilometres or so we arrived at a shallow river with crops growing all over it. A short distance downstream was a deep narrow lake with a bird on it.

I dare say that if you lived at this over-promoted site you would soon compile a worthwhile list of birds. We didn't have the luxury of so much time but I managed a lifer in the form of a group of great thick-knees.

We arrived back at Dev Vilas at 1100 and left for Bharatpur shortly thereafter. The road was woeful with much traffic, roadworks and cattle.

It took six hours to get to our new home, the Laxmi Palace, a grand building dating from 1888. While we were enjoying a beer or three, D.D. Mittal, our birdwatching guide arrived to explain the next day's program. Disappointingly the world renowned lakes of Bharatpur were as dry as a nun's, but the word on the street was that there were some good birds to be had ex-park. Everyone in Bharatpur talks bird.

Laxmi Palace, our Bharatpur hotel



**KEOLADEO GHANA NATIONAL PARK (Bharatpur):** *A paradise for the avian world, and a pilgrimage site for the bird lovers, it was once known as the best duck shooting resort in the British Empire. It was declared a reserve for birds in 1956 and later upgraded to National Park. UNESCO has listed it as a world heritage site. The geographical location is ideal as it is on the main North-South avian route of India. Although small in size, only 29 sq km, it boasts more than 375 species of birds, and more than 132 of them breed inside the Keoladeo Ghana National Park and nearly every year new ones are added to the list. The sanctuary not only attracts birds from India but also from places like Europe, Siberia, China and Tibet.*

#### **Day 16 – Monday 19<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

D.D. took us into the park. We walked a long circuit that took in a number of habitats. The highlights were my first sighting of brown-headed barbets and an awesome dusky eagle-owl sitting on its nest. A five metre long Indian rock python added to the mix.

A post-lunch tour of the city's drainage canals produced an amazing number of birds. The canals were in reality sewers with all the fun things that sewers have. One special sewer had a fair scrum of greater painted-snipe, a wonderful bird if ever there was one. Mayette's special treat was to be bitten by a dog and have the locals laugh at her. It took a while for her to calm down, and even longer for me to cut up the bodies. But at least I had somewhere to throw the pieces where nobody would notice. Next on the street theatre menu was a motorcycle getting squashed by something bigger, scattering its occupants hither and yon. Screaming and bleeding could only enhance our experience of the sewer tour. Max was really getting into it and I started to fear that he was actually interested in finding birds.



D.D. tried to find us some bitterns but we had no luck. Birding degenerated into a pretty good city tour, which included the town fort, complete with moat.

Early drinks were called. D.D. didn't have to be asked twice to join us and by the time my mammal-watching friend Jon Hall arrived (as planned) we were well on the way. A good gas-bag was had by all.

### **Day 17 – Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

We left Bharatpur on the short drive to Fatehpur Sikri. It was foggy but that didn't slow the traffic. Less of it reached its destination though.

***FATEHPUR SIKRI*** : 37 kms from Agra is a city built predominantly in red sandstone called Fatehpur Sikri. It was built by the Mughal Emperor, Akbar, and finished in 1585. He had planned this city as his capital but a shortage of water compelled him to abandon it. After 20 years, the capital of Mughals was shifted to Lahore. This deserted city has retained many of the old structures and is one of the finest examples of Mughal architectural splendour at its height. The mosque is said to be a copy of the mosque in Mecca and has designs derived from Persian and Hindu architecture.



Fatehpur Sikri, 1571

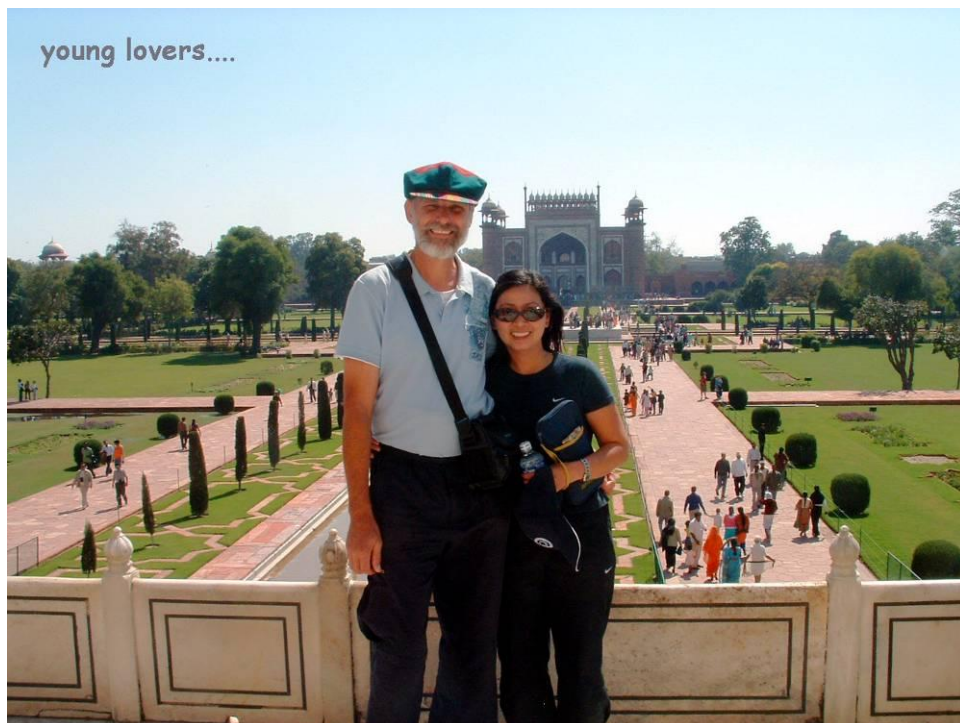


The old city was a surprise as I had never heard of it. It was uncrowded, quite stunning, and our Islamic guide Saeed made our visit all the more interesting with a professional tour and his encyclopaedic knowledge. I hope that Fifi's comments and questions have not caused him to make a rash career change, or start a drug habit.

Agra was the next stop on our tour. The drive from Fatehpur Sikri is a very short one. The Hotel Grand Imperial was our new home and is grand enough but for the detail – like the floors had never been cleaned. Petty detail I guess. The rooms had bar fridges so it wasn't all that bad.

The Taj Mahal is an attractive building. We lobbied at midday on the middle day of our holiday. There weren't too many other tourists at the time of our visit and it was clear that Saeed, like every other guide, knew how to maximise our experience. He had all the camera angles sorted and rattled off the historical and architectural details proudly and well.





**THE TAJ MAHAL**, mausoleum of Mughal Emperor Shah Jana's chief wife, Mumtaz Mahal, is synonymous with India. It's curving, gently swelling dome and the square base upon which its rests so lightly is a familiar image from hundreds of brochures and travel books. The Taj is undoubtedly one of the most spectacular buildings of the

*world. Renowned for its architectural magnificence and aesthetic beauty, it counts among man's proudest creations and is invariably included in the list of the world's foremost wonders. As a tomb, it has no match upon earth, for mortal remains have never been housed in greater grandeur.*

*It is situated more than 900 ft. (275 m.) away from the entrance at the opposite end of the garden. Towering almost 200 ft. (76m.) in height, the tomb stands on its own marble plinth, which rests on a red sandstone platform that serves to level the land as it slopes to the river. Four tall minarets rise up from the corners of the white marble plinth. They taper to a majestic height of 138 ft and are crowned with eight windowed cupolas. The Taj Mahal is as much a Hindu monument as it is an Islamic mausoleum.*

Lunch at an outdoor restaurant was good, save for Sir Giles and Fifi prattling on about the absurd patterns on the tablecloth, the poorly ironed creases on the pants of the waiters and the absence of a seafood platter for two on the menu.

The Red Fort was significant and good. I am not sure why they built it – I forgot. But they must have had a very good reason because it is really big and strong.

**THE RED FORT:** *This magnificent structure in red sandstone looks strong and invincible. The common belief goes that it was build by the Mughal emperor Akbar and further developed by his heirs. But in reality the fort was actually a small fortress that a Hindu warlord had built in the 5th century considering the strategic importance of Agra on the banks of River Yamuna.*

*Later when the Hindu kings and their dynasties were taken over by the Muslim rulers, the small fortress was developed which took the shape of a massive fortress. The Lodhis rebuilt it in the 13th century and Mughal emperor Akbar renovated the Fort in 1565. Though Akbar built it for military purposes, his heir son Jehangir and grandson Shahajehan turned it into a palatial fort.*

*The majestic structure nearly 3 sq km in area and the walls are 20 feet high. It is surrounded by a moat full of water and crocodiles. Many buildings inside the fort were built by Shahajehan, unique among which is the stunning pearl mosque.*





Red Fort, Agra, 13th century (and later)





Back at the hotel and Brother Raymond and I braved the traffic, turds and tuk-tuks to find a beer retailer. Our next mission was to spread sufficient misinformation to avoid being joined by company we were seeking to avoid. It was not easy.



## Day 18 – Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2007

As occupants on India's fastest train, our day started in an unusual fashion. We were belting along at 130km/hr. I was being spoken at by India's entrant in the World Talking Championships but at least that meant that I couldn't hear others complain about the caterer's poor choice in mineral water, the disagreeable temperature in the carriage or the parlous state of the Cuban cigar industry.



Jhansi was our train-stopping place. Here two drivers picked us up in sedans and sped us to Khajuraho, home of the so-called erotic temples. I expect that the travel time achieved will now be the new record for the Jhansi to Khajuraho Rally. Thankfully I had earlier decided that I needed a drink. My commitment to this simple daily principle was not challenged during the drive.

**KHAJURAHO:** *Khajuraho group of temples in Central India is one of the most illustrious manifestations of Indian architecture. These 10th-11th century temples represent religion, patronage, artistic genius and aesthetic sensibility all at once. Built in the typical 'Nagara' style of architecture, over 20 of the original 85 temples have survived the climate for more than a thousand years despite being lost into obscurity and hence, suffering neglect for a long period of time. Believed to have been constructed during the Chandela rule, the temples belong to Shaivism and Vaishnavism sects of Hinduism, Jainism and 'tantrism'. Unlike other temple complexes in the country, there is no enclosure wall surrounding these temples with each of them on a high and solid raised masonry platform. Though not very large, they have elegant proportions and are adorned with sculptures on their exteriors and even interiors.*

*These walled sculptures include depiction of numerous deities, their attendants, celestial maidens in sensuous positions and provocative postures, embracing couples (some of them in erotic sexual positions), dancers and musicians and couples engaged in various refinements of courtly love. It is believed that one temple alone sports over six hundred and fifty such figures ranging from sensual and warm depictions to explicit sexual activity (believed to illustrate the tantric rites by some). Some of these much-famed or much-notorious sexual postures are said to follow the Kama Sutra, the ancient Indian manual of*

*the art of making love. One of the most preferred destinations after Taj Mahal, Khajuraho has provided a scenic backdrop for many movies.*

Now I come to think of it, we stopped at a palace for lunch. I do not recall its name nor do I expect that anyone could find it again if I did.

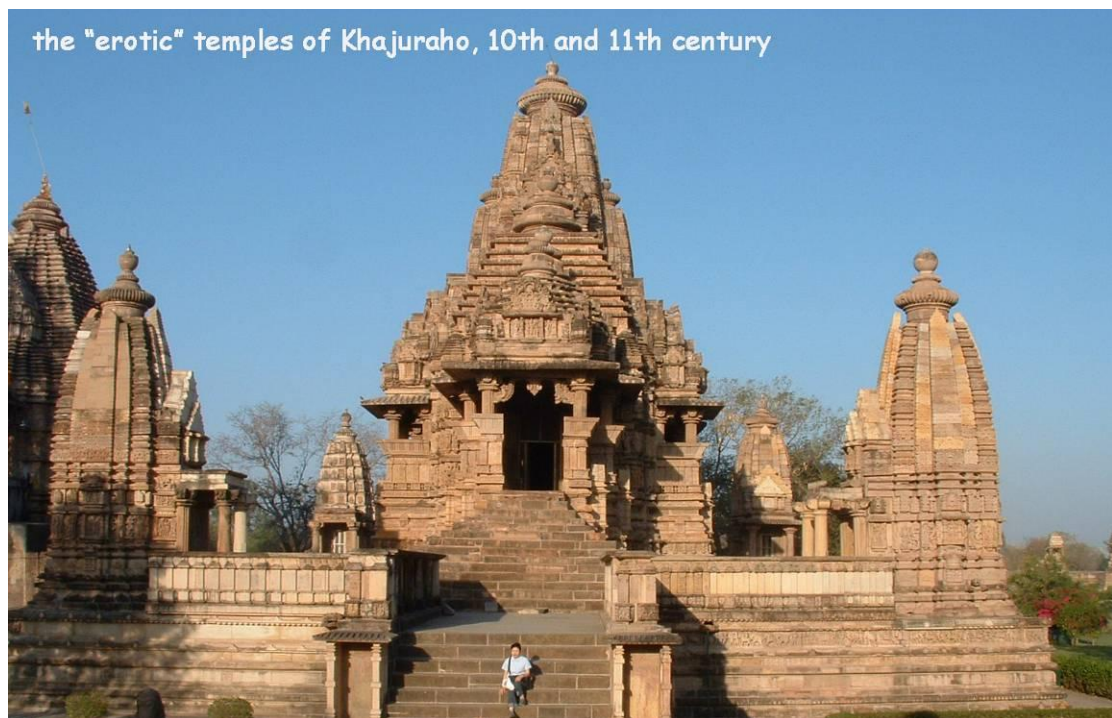
There are only hotels of the four star variety in Khajuraho and ours was the Holliday Inn. We turned up in time for Sir Giles and I to have a wander about the fields and creeks. The best of the birds were red avadavat and Siberian rubythroat, although there was no shortage of all sorts of things that were not seen easily elsewhere.

The word “conned” comes to mind when considering my opinion of the evening’s sound and light show that we paid to endure within the temple complex. We stayed for the duration, unlike some others. Realistically, it cut down on valuable drinking time.

Our dinner was in the town and was just like almost every other meal we had.

### **Day 19 – Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2007**

UNESCO has given the temples of Khajuraho a World Heritage listing. They should have given it to our guide as well. He had been guiding at Khajuraho since before the temple builders found the place. That gave him a keen insight into what they were actually thinking. This was disappointing, because although the temples are plastered with all manner of interesting sculptures of farm animals and people without any clothes, his commentary made me feel as though the building of the temples was all a big mistake, as was our visit and perhaps our very existence. We were wanting to take pictures of shaggers, not get a player profile of the first three million Hindu gods and what they may have been thinking if they hadn’t been doped to the eyeballs and looking for attractive camels.

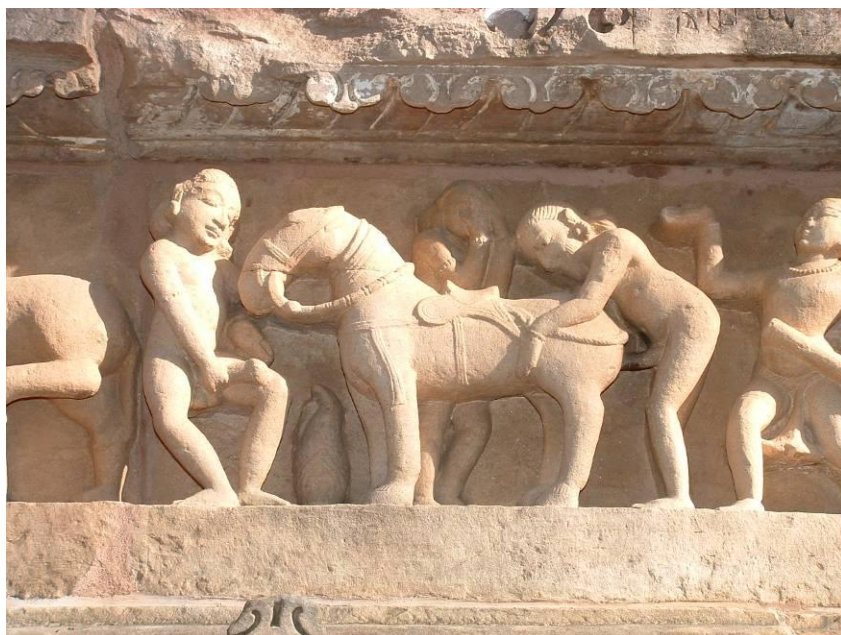






One aspect of the temples left no room for doubt – whoever they chose for the breasts’ model had great tits. Spookily, they always pointed at you no matter your approach angle.

Before we entered the incurable phase of “temple / fort madness” we pinned our guide to a large temple protuberance that seemed to have been positioned for just such a purpose, then left.





Thankfully we were back into a natural history chunk of our tour, but the drive to Bandhavgarh National Park took eight hours. 80 minutes of this was spent waiting for lunch, and ten minutes eating it. Our restaurant had the distinctly odd name of “The Shark Inn”. The absence of any sharks, live, or on the menu, was not the oddest aspect of the facility. It was miles from anywhere on a dirt track at a site that is not even interesting enough to be classed as boring. Here large empty ponds (dry moats?) circled tables that nestled under head-cleaving low fixed umbrellas. Waiters threw water at us.

Sir Giles was having none of this. He decided to have a kip on the grounds that he had entered a stage of life where he couldn’t stay upright and his body hurt. He babbled something about hospitals and doctors. We missed him.

At Bandhavgarh I can’t recall if we stayed at the Tiger’s Den, Tiger’s Hotel Camp, Tiger’s Stripes’ Resort or the Striped Friendly Tiger’s Resort Tented Camp. One thing was for sure, there was “Tiger” in it somewhere. Our arrival coincided with sunset.

A group of local villagers were illegally collecting firewood in the national park. One of their number, a lady, found she was unable to continue with this simple pursuit. Two tiger cubs wanted to play. They did this by eating bits of her. Mum tiger was too late; the party had already started when she arrived to say “bad kitties”. One consequence was that the “best” part of the park was then closed to visitors, ie us.

I was in no mood for someone who explained that beer cost 250 rupees per bottle. I suggested this was too much to pay, the manager agreed, and we negotiated a special rate (150 – still too much, but hey...). The world continued to rotate on its axis.

Sir Giles was not well and not happy.

**BANDHAVGARH** is a new national park with a very long history. Set among the Vindhya hills of Madhya Pradesh with an area of 168sq miles (437sq kms) it contains a



*wide variety of habitats and a high density of game, including a large number of Tigers ~ 80.*

*Prior to becoming a national park, the forests around Bandhavgarh had long been maintained as a Shikargarh, or game preserve of the Maharaja of Rewa. The Maharaja and his guests carried out hunting - otherwise the wildlife was well protected. It was considered a good omen for Maharaja of Rewa to shoot 109 tigers. His Highness Maharaja Venkat Raman Singh shot 111 Tigers by 1914.*

*Bandhavgarh has been a center of human activity and settlement for over 2000 years, and there are references to it in the ancient books, the Narad-Panch Ratra and the Shiva Purana. Legend has it that Lord Rama, hero of the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, stopped at Bandhavgarh on his way back to his homeland after defeating the demon King Ravana of Lanka. Two monkey architects, who had engineered a bridge between the isles of Lanka and the mainland, are said to have built Bandhavgarh's fort.*

*The oldest sign of habitation in the park are caves dug into the sandstone to the north of the fort. Several contain Brahmi inscriptions dating from the 1st century B.C. Various dynasties have ruled the fort, for example, the Maghas from the 1st century A.D., the Vakatakas from the 3rd century A.D., From that time onwards Bandhavgarh was ruled by a succession of dynasties including the Chandela Kings of Bundelkhand who built the famous temples at Khajuraho. The Baghel Kings, the direct ancestors of the present Royal family of Rewa, established their dynasty at Bandhavgarh in the 12th century. It remained their capital till 1617 when the center of court life moved to Rewa, 75 miles (120Kms) to the north. Without royal patronage Bandhavgarh became more and more deserted until forest overran the area and it became the royal hunting reserve. This helped to preserve the forest and its wildlife, although the Maharajas made full use of their rights.*

*At independence Bandhavgarh remained the private property of the Maharaja until he gave it to the state for the formation of the National Park in 1968. After the park was created poaching was brought under control and the number of animals rose dramatically. Small dams and water holes were built to solve the problem of water shortage. Grazing by local cattle was stopped and the village within the park boundaries was relocated. The Tigers in particular prospered and the 1986 extension provided much needed forest to accommodate them.*

## **Day 20 – Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2007**

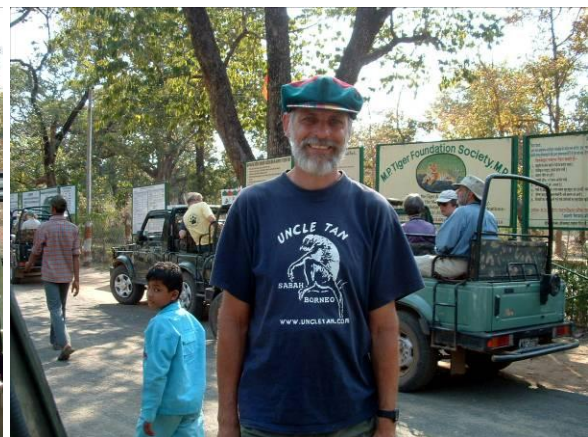
Our first Bandhavgarh safari saw us in two vehicles. Brave Dave went with the ailing Sir Giles and party. “Poor bugger him” when our jeep had a tiger walking along the road within 15 minutes of our start. This little lady had an indiscreet wee on the side of the road before wandering out of sight as four jeeps tried to climb up its arse. Two of the three other jeeps went elsewhere but our driver positioned us in a perfect spot to see mum emerge from the forest, say hullo to its favourite tree and lick its chops in anticipation of a McBandhavgarh Spotted Meal Deal. It then roared a bit and buggered off, disturbing the odd spotted deer in the process.



The scenery was pretty good with rocky hills and well forested gullies. There were high numbers of game animals.

After breakfast at the Tiger Thingy Camp Mayette and I went walking along the nearby river when we caught up with the Jimmies. We found lots of birds including orange-headed and Tickell's thrushes, woolly-necked storks, woodpeckers and waterbirds as well as some friendly moo-cows.

The afternoon safari was lame (by comparison).





A VENT Tour with David Bishop at the helm crossed paths with us. I much enjoyed a beer or three with David as we caught up on “birds were here, birds were there” and the latest critter sightings. The evening drinking party grew as Joanna Lumley, Whitney Houston and two other “girls” based in Switzerland joined us. It was loud, although rather fun and with some occasionally intelligent conversation.

## **Day 21 – Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

The morning safari produced Indian horseshoe bats within some 2000 year old Buddhist caves. Malabar pied hornbills and a tiger were also sighted. The tiger was cornered by a fatness of elephants and most of the jeeps that operated in the park. The elephants were busily clearing vegetation from the tiger’s attempted rest spot. It was ridiculous.

After a quick breakfast at the lodge we returned to the park for a private tour to the Bandhavgarh Fort area. This took us past an enormous stone statue of Vishnu and up a winding path to what is India’s oldest fort.

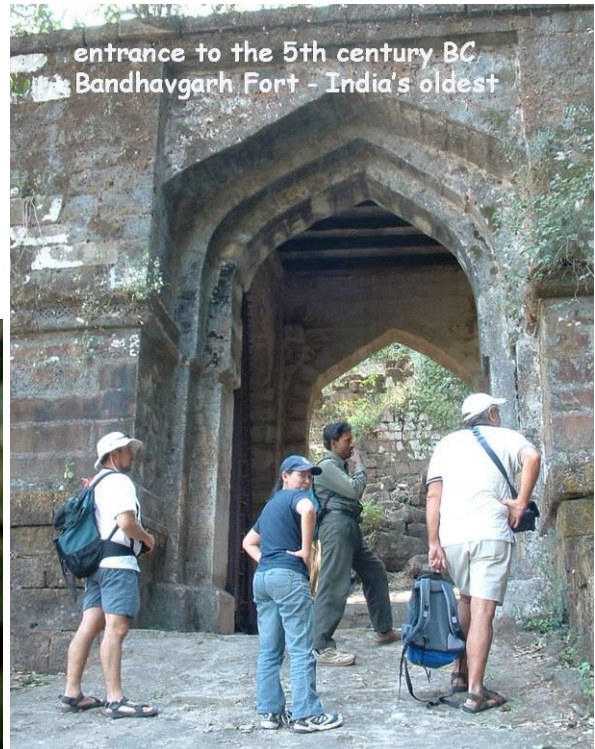
***THE FORT:*** *The fort still belongs to the Maharaja of Rewa and permission is required to visit it. However permission is available locally and no trip to Bandhavgarh is complete without making an effort to climb up to the fort.*

*There is a footpath at a convenient place to park vehicles on the southern side of the fort in the lush jungle which surrounds its base. This point is known as Shesh Saaia, named after a unique 35 foot (11 meters) long statue of reclining Vishnu carved around the 10th century, from whose feet the Charanganga is said to flow.*

*As you follow the path the most remarkable sights are the 10th century rock images of the incarnations of Vishnu. A statue of Narsimhan (half man half lion) towers almost 22 feet above the grass. There is a carving of Barah Bhagwan (the boar incarnation), and a small temple enshrining a large image of Vishnu in his fish avatar. The tortoise incarnation stands unenclosed and flanked by later carvings of Ganesh, the elephant God, and other deities. The charm of this walk lies in discovering these monuments in the jungle, unspoilt and unexploited. Some of the statues lie off the main path and so it is best to take a guide. Apart from the avatars, well worth seeing are three small temples of around the 12th century. These temples are deserted but the fort is still used as a place of worship. Kabir Das, the celebrated 16th century saint, once lived and preached here.*

*The natural ramparts of the fort give breathtaking view of the surrounding countryside. Vultures wheel around the precipice, which also attracts blue rock thrushes and crag martins. The fort has a small population of Blackbuck, which have been reintroduced and to some extent protected from Tigers in the park below by repairs to the masonry walls at the edges of the fort.*

*Thus Bandhavgarh offers excellent game and bird viewing and a historical interest which most other parks lack.*



David Bishop told us that we could easily see (and smell) Theobald's tomb bats within the gateway of the fort. Any mammal with an interesting name like that is worth a look! The notes in the text supplied above were more than accurate with pre-Indiana Jones fig-covered temples, gigantic stone fish and other animals and lots of forest, birds and tiger shit. One had the feeling that Harrison Ford, a tiger, and a brace of important Hindu gods could appear simultaneously around the next bend in the path. I could have spent a whole day exploring, ticking off birds and possibly adding myself to the food chain.

Back to camp just in time for the afternoon safari on a day when too many safaris were never enough. Nothing new was seen and the focus was quickly diverted to nibbles, drinks and dinner around a fire. A number of sincere offers of free accommodation in Switzerland were secured. Some almost teary-eyed women wished they could join our tour. Hmmm, maybe we could do a deal here?





### **Day 22 – Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

We left Bandhavgarh for Kanha National Park. Uniquely the drive took less time than expected – five hours. We arrived at the Tuli Jungle Camp and were told by the super-efficient and cheerful management that we had been upgraded. Every time I hear this I have no idea what it means, as I don't know what I have been upgraded to or from, and in this case I had never heard of the place. This time we hit the jackpot. Our "tents" had a



walk-in rate of \$US600 per night. Nothing more needs to be said. Easily the most luxurious accommodation I have ever seen, let alone stayed in.



**KANHA NATIONAL PARK:** Located in the Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh, Kanha National Ppark cum Tiger Reserve extends over an area of over 1,940-sq-kms. The major feature of this region's interesting topography is a horseshoe shaped valley and the whole park area is surrounded by the spurs of the Mokal Range. The Surpan River meanders through Kanha's central grasslands that cover the extensive plateau. Steep rocky escarpments along the edges offer breathtaking views of the valley.

*Bamboo forests flow into Sal forests and meadows. There are herds of spotted deer to be seen with smaller herds of beautiful blackbuck. There is a very strong possibility that you will see the rare barasingha, the swamp deer. Once there were only 66 of these in Kanha, but careful conservation and management raised their population to over 300.*

Every park in India has different entry requirements and safari times. Nobody knows why. The PM safari in Kanha is a short one from 1600 to 1815 but our luck extended to close and stunning views of both male and female gaur and better yet, a 250 kg 11year old male tiger!! We arrived late for the jeep scrum watching this sleepy cat doing jack-shit. So ours was the last jeep in a long line. This had the advantage that when the pussy started to move in a direction that would take it behind our jeep we had the box seat. Our very relaxed and competent guide / driver, Dr Shiva, added jeep reversing to his grab-bag of skills. If he tried to turn our jeep around the other jeeps would have jumped us. Ours was then the lone jeep on one side of the predicted gap the tiger would take when it emerged from the forest to cross the road to a ginormous deer-filled meadow. The animal walked straight at our vehicle causing us to back up in case it wanted to eat one of the Jimmies. Click-click-click (at least before digital that's what you would have heard).





One of the problems of going on so many safaris in different parks (aside from haemorrhoids) is that drivers and guides stop for every living thing on the basis that you have just appeared in the Sub-Continent in the past 20 minutes and wouldn't have seen

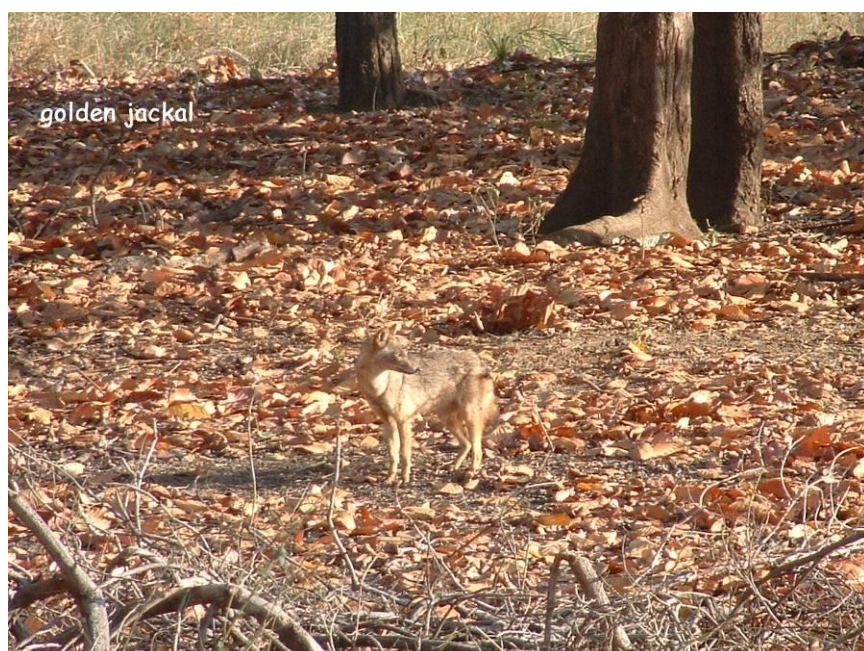


anything yet. No matter how much we pleaded “do not stop FOR ANYTHING UNLESS WE TELL YOU”, they stopped for cattle egrets, big white trees and our 16,348<sup>th</sup> spotted deer.

The toilet in our luxury tent was a very nice one. It and I became very good friends during the long night.

### **Day 23 – Monday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

Dosed up on anti-poo drugs and with nothing else in my system I braved the morning’s five hour safari. Aside from good views of about 20% of the world’s last remaining swamp deer we didn’t see much that was new. The dream of seeing dhole and four-horned antelope was not to be realised. Common snipe and Indian scimitar-babbler were the best of the birds.





Indian cultural trap #68: Whenever you ask a guide in a national park “Does great crested gnargler (or whatever) occur here?”, you will get one of these responses – “yes, but in the buffer zone away from here”, or “no, but they are easy to see in XXXX (substitute name for the next park on your journey)”, or “not this time of the year as the grass is too long” (or short, green, wet, cold, burnt etc).

The afternoon’s short safari once again produced critters, with poor views of a sloth bear and an adult tiger lying around.

## **Day 24 – Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

We managed to squeeze a truncated jeep safari into the morning before leaving for Pench National Park. The morning was icy cold in the open vehicle and we failed to find anything too significant. It was probably late morning before animals started to defrost.

Much posturing took place as most of us tried to find ourselves in the one vehicle, with the other being occupied by a re-born Sir Giles and his train. We noted a tyre on Sir Giles’ vehicle with the steel belt exposed. We were not in that car when the tyre came apart, thankfully without loss of life.

I tipped Sir Giles’ driver and paid for their bottled water rather than speak in English to Sir Giles. He had become fixated in a rat’s nest of conspiracy theories that revolved around getting the worst guides, being in the wrong vehicle with the wrong people, or not being in the lead vehicle, or for that matter, the second vehicle. Ankur, our Prudent guide, asked me whether he was a friend of mine.



**PENCH NATIONAL PARK** lies among the southern valleys of the Satpura ranges in the state of Madhya Pradesh in central India. The park covers an area of 292.85 sq km but if combined with the neighbouring forest area of the Mowgli Pench Sanctuary (118.31 sq km) and the buffer zone (346.73 sq km), they total up to an area of 757.89 sq km to form what is known as the Pench Tiger Reserve. It was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1977 and it got its status of a National Park in 1983.

*In 1992 it gained the protection of "Project Tiger" and was declared the 19th Tiger Reserve of India. In 2001, the tiger count of the park stood at 55.*

*The area around Pench was the inspiration for Kipling's "Jungle Book". A hydro-electric dam was built on the Pench River between 1973 and 1988. This created a reservoir that submerged 74 sq km of the park. A positive aspect to this man-made creation is that it now attracts large numbers of aquatic birds, resident and migratory.*

*More than 200 species of birds have been spotted in the park.*

*The vegetation is quite varied but the predominant species are teak and bamboo. The Kulu gum tree with its stark white colour and brilliant green leaves is also a favourite with visitors.*

The afternoon safari started at 1500. The park is more open and much drier than the nearby Kanha. I had no real expectations for what we may see but numerous gaur and a leopard sitting on a rock were pretty nice. We watched the leopard for about half an hour from about 30 metres, with the very real prospect of some action when a large herd of chital walked in its direction before veering off at the last moment.



We enjoyed a few single malts before some beer in front of a fire.



## **Day 25 – Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

Dave told me to get the torch. It was still dark and two sets of eyes were staring at him from within some long grass in the hotel grounds. For a short time we thought we had found two caracal kittens but we settled for jungle cats as more likely given the views that we had. Apparently they were in the same spot before Max and Dave went to bed the previous night.

The morning safari was enjoyable but we saw no cats. We covered a lot of interesting territory and although we were to see no tigers at Pench there was plenty of evidence that they were about.

The afternoon safari started with great views of a jungle cat walking across the road, some painted spurfowl and the almost guaranteed sightings of gaur.



Some beers were enjoyed before we had a wonderful meal that miraculously did not include rice. We complimented the Nepalese chef, although Fifi told him the meal was better the previous night (when a different chef was on duty). Ya gotta luv tourists, eh? Idiot.

## **Day 26 – Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2007**

Our last jeep safari in Pench failed to locate anything we hadn't seen earlier.

We checked out of the very good Pench Jungle Camp and began our short journey to Nagpur, from where we were to catch an overnight train to Delhi if we lived that long. Our driver for this cameo was insane. Rarely do I tell drivers to slow down but I managed to yell at him just before either of the Jimmies did. 140km/h is a tad quick considering the traffic mix and all the rest of India's road fun. He slowed for a short

while before he started speeding up again. Ankur translated to him that we thought he was a dangerous driver and that he was likely to die soon. Possibly today, and not necessarily from a traffic accident. He later apologised to Mayette explaining that he had to drive fast or else he would fall asleep.

The train journey started mid-afternoon and ended at Delhi the next morning at about breakfast time. Fifi and Sir Giles rabbitied on about how excited they were to be travelling on a train again. I think this had something to do with the superior chi to be had on disgusting railway stations.

The train's catering included afternoon tea and snacks and a cooked dinner that didn't make me sick. Travelling with us in our compartment was a charming Indian couple. The lady hennaed Mayette's hand, which made her very happy. I jammed earplugs in my ears, took a sleeping pill and got eight hour's of magnificent sleep.



### **Day 27 – Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2007**

Max discovered that he had dragged his daypack straps through a strategically placed human turd on the railway platform in front of the train carriage door. This remains an enduring image of India. And yes, there were toilets on the station.

The train had been delayed by a thick fog bank. It was thick, but not thick enough to prevent us from seeing brown bums pointing groundwards everywhere we looked out of the train window in the early morning. This was our welcome to Delhi.

Happily our vehicle was waiting with our last and probably best driver. Rakesh wore a jacket and a smile. He didn't say much at first as he assessed his new clients. It turned out that Rakesh was very well studied in Indian history and spoke and understood English perfectly.

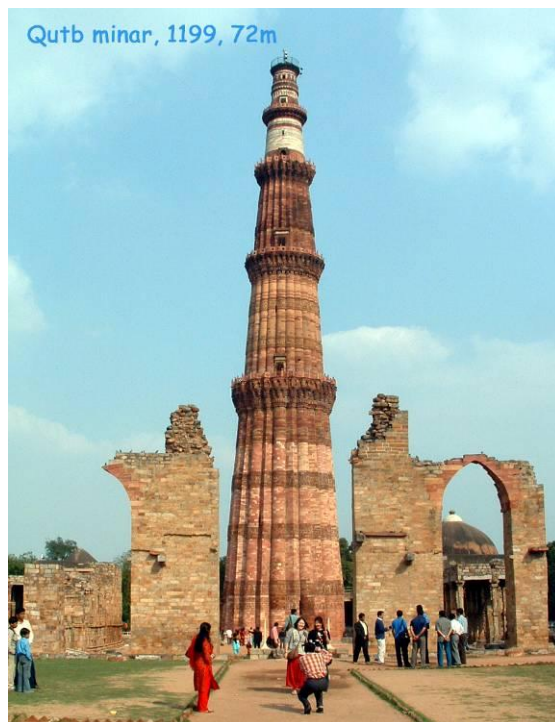


The four star The Claridges was our temporary home. It sits in the very leafy New Delhi and is located near consulates and rich people. New Delhi was a bit of a surprise in that it is easily the greenest city I have seen. The public transport vehicles all run on natural gas and someone picks up the rubbish and feeds it to the black kites (more on this later).

It took a while to check in, as the rooms were not ready for our very early arrival. We had breakfast and lounged about in the garden. After checking in and returning to the lobby I found a circle of hotel staff surrounding a clearly agitated Sir Giles. He stammered that he had put his undies on back to front, had opened his toothpaste at the wrong end (again) and had somehow contrived to get a four-striped palm squirrel lodged in his bum. Whatever Sir Giles' problems were, I wasn't interested, and went for a walk.

My walk took me past an enormous Indian flying fox colony – many thousands.

Lunch at a fancy restaurant was followed by a visit to Qutb, a vowel-challenged UNESCO site with lots of important old things, buildings mainly. Many of them had not completely fallen down. There was a big minar poking up in the sky and acting as an aircraft navigation hazard. We then visited a 20 year old Bahai Temple that I couldn't give a toss about and refused to enter.



We asked Rakesh to source some beer for us (and for him) for our time in Corbett National Park. Sir Giles was asked if he wanted tonic water. It took a considerable part of the remainder of the day for him to calculate how much he needed.

Dinner was at a Chinese restaurant that set a record of sorts in that it had no hint of a Chinese person. The food was okay. We finished the last of our duty free single malt. The best investment we ever made.

### **Day 28 – Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2007**

The Delhi Red Fort was relatively boring if you had been to the one in Agra from which it was modelled.

We rickshawed from the fort to a nearby Islamic mosque. The rickshaw ride was fun as we negotiated narrow streets with dangling electric wires, humourless traffic cops and each other's rickshaws.



The mosque security wanted an extortionate fee for bringing my camera through so I decided they could get stuffed. Mayette and Dave couldn't be bothered either so we three terminal temple malady patients sat outside.

Our lunch stop was three time zones away for reasons that were very unclear. After lunch we were dropped back at the hotel. Those of us that could readily make decisions (Dave, Max, Mayette and I) walked to the Khan Markets. It was pleasant but hardly a bargain hunter's paradise.

The late afternoon de-briefing session was held in the Jimmies' room. Mr Joy joined us for dinner. The restaurant was the same one we lunched at the day before and the menu was identical. No surprises here.

### **Day 29 – Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

Holi Day and everything was closed for a holiday.

Rakesh wanted to get his bus well out of Delhi by sunrise, to avoid roadblocks and too many pissed idiots throwing food dye at us or becoming accident statistics underneath us. After stopping at a hotel that did not appear to be trading, for a tea stop that nobody wanted we arrived at Corbett National Park by mid-morning.



Our last accommodation outside of Delhi was with the Fawltly Towers chain's Corbett Wild Camp. This rather ordinary and poorly managed facility was a late replacement for the more expensive and probably much better Corbett Jungle Lodge. The reasons for the change were not well explained to us, but having arrived it was more trouble than it was worth to move. The rooms were spartan, the plumbing generally dysfunctional and the staff more likely to be a nuisance than a help. I suspect the latter problem was more the fault of their employer.

We had two hours before lunch so I shot up the forested hill opposite the camp and looked for birds. I suspected that it was out of bounds but as I didn't ask anyone permission I didn't care. There were tiger scats everywhere and stressed deer barking so tigers were about. Lots of birds were seen but nothing I hadn't seen elsewhere or in Nepal.

Lunch was surprisingly nice. We then walked along the nearby river looking for ibisbill or anything else we could find. Apparently the ibisbill left the week before. We found a few birds and generally enjoyed being out of vehicles and away from temples and their kin.

Beer and more beer as the mercury not so much fell as plummeted. I went dinnerless as I fell asleep before it arrived.

### **Day 30 – Monday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

*Located in the foothills of the Himalayas is the majestic **CORBETT NATIONAL PARK**. It is famous for its wild population of tigers, leopards and elephants.*

*In 1858 the first step towards protection of Corbett National Park forest was initiated when farming and cattle were banned in the lower Patlidun Valley. The Forest Department took control of the area and declared it as a reserve forest in 1879 under the Forest Act. In 1934 Governor Malcolm Hailey declared the reserve forest as a sanctuary. Soon after Governor Hailey and Sir Smythies proposed the upgrading of the sanctuary to a national park. During this period Major James E Corbett was getting famous for his man eating tiger shoots. Corbett, who was well versed with the area, was consulted and helped in marking the boundaries for the proposed national park.*

*The Wildlife Protection Act was enacted in 1972 and Corbett National Park was one of the first national parks to launch "Project Tiger", a government sponsored program for the conservation of the tiger and its habitat.*

*In 1991 the area of the reserve was further increased with the inclusion of the Sonanadi Wildlife Sanctuary. Today Corbett National Park stands as one of the best protected tiger reserves in the world. There are around 140 tigers in Corbett.*

Birdwatching Day or "Sir Giles Management Day". The six of us crowded into a jeep with a driver and guide. We speared off in the direction of the nearest forest where we could go for a walk and look for birds and where there was no real chance of us being trodden on or eaten. The guide was skilled and personable and didn't get the shits

with Sir Giles like the rest of us did. At one point Sir Giles fell over while shouldering others out of the way in trying to look at a bird.

As we walked along a quiet lightly trafficked sealed road an adult female tiger appeared on the road about 40 metres ahead of us. It calmly trotted across it and down an embankment. The guide prevented me from approaching it and the driver, some distance behind, wanted his mum. The tiger had descended a steep washaway and had we been further along the road it would have been doubtful that it could have stopped before it landed on us.

By late morning Sir Giles was buggered but that didn't stop him complaining about the wonderful lunch site nor about umpteen other things that I have forgotten. We then searched for owls fruitlessly before returning to camp. We dumped our beer in the river to cool it down. I forget what happened after that.

### **Day 31 – Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

Basil's Indian protégé woke us at 0455. This was for the 0530 wake-up call. A small error, but the damp Torquay-like air of Corbett breeds that sort of mistake. It was lucky we got up early because we had to wait for an hour at the park entry gate before our rattly truck arrived to take us into the park.

The forest in Corbett is superb and if it wasn't for the numbers of vehicles along its roads it would have been quite productive for mammals methinks. Never mind, we managed a troupe of Indian smooth-coated otters, gharials and a wonderful concentration of various freshwater fish. We caught up with David Bishop again and quickly swapped notes. He had more to swap than I did. We ventured as far as the end of a dam where I picked up white-tailed eagle, which was to be the only new bird for me at Corbett.





The return shakedown was via a small herd of nine elephants, then two more to add to one that Dave had seen for us earlier in the day.

The morning safari lasted until 1330 so we hardly had time for lunch before the afternoon one commenced. This wasn't too exciting as we entered the park from its rain-shadow side. The best sightings were dozens of kalij pheasants, junglefowl and emerald doves and the chance to fool about with some tame spotted deer and blackbuck at a guards' outpost. The return journey was freezing, arriving well after sunset. Guess what happened next?



### **Day 32 – Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

Our last jeep safari was into the well-tigered part of Corbett. Multiple sets of spoor ran in all directions along the tracks but we saw no cats. Sharp-eyed Dave found us a pair of yellow-throated martens but that was about it.

Back to the ranch and showered before walking along the road for an hour or so.

The return journey to Delhi could not have been in greater contrast than the outward one. This time the traffic was all there and our poor driver must have felt suicidal as he was pulled over twice by various authorities and fined the equivalent of three months pay for reasons that were trivial at best but more likely reflecting endemic corruption among government workers. Rakesh had to pay the fines in cash on the spot. This necessitated a whip around to come up with the readies before we could continue.



Of note was the spectacle of the black kites. These were not kites being flown by kiddies but tens of thousands or more (I am not exaggerating) live black kites on the Delhi rubbish tip and occupying about 25% of all air space within sight of it in every direction. I could imagine that the kite factor would be a component of daily weather forecasting.



By the time we reached The Claridges I barely had time to gulp down two longnecks before our farewell dinner. The dinner was predictable but we were quite surprised when Mr Joy and Ankur produced some very thoughtful farewell gifts for each of us. There were books, clothes and wooden wall hangings. I have never received a gift from a travel agency before!

On behalf of our group, Dave asked Mr Joy about our payment for three domestic airfares when the last minute rescheduling meant that there were only two. Mr Joy agreed that this was an error and said he would provide a refund.

Poor Rakesh took us to the hotel. We gave him a very generous tip for his services, given the nature of his day. I gave him a written reference.

### **Day 33 – Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

After breakfast we took tuk-tuks to a government run department store (“Cottage Industries”) we had visited before going to Corbett. We learnt that there were 16 different “Cottage Industries” stores. We had gone to the wrong one. There was “Cottage Industries Market”, “The Cottage Industries”, “Cottage Industries”, “Cottage Craft Industries” and the “Peoples’ Front of Judea”, to name but a few. We climbed back into the tuk-tuks and we found the “right one”.



I had my heart set on a leather jacket. Buying an item was no simple matter however. Assuming you agreed to purchase, the stallholder prints an invoice with all manner of information, mostly useless. This entitles the holder to go to the payment counter, the delivery counter and the security man. This can take at least half an hour. My transaction was not smooth at all. After being demonstrably ignored by the roly-polly “girl with a job working for the government” behind the payment counter, I screwed the invoice up and threw it at her. Eventually I walked out with my nice new jacket

after the intervention of various folk including the store manager. Nice bloke, good tea.

Rakesh was late for our lunch pick-up. Those of a suspicious nature started to develop conspiracy theories regarding tour agents, payments of money and catching cabs to airports. Lunch was wonderful and so was the walk back through the quiet, leafy and culturally interesting Lodi Gardens – a real gem for any big city, let alone one in India. We showered at the hotel's health club and packed our bags.

Dinner was perhaps the best and tastiest meal of the holiday. Unfortunately it was a tad rushed as we were on our way to the airport. Mr Joy delivered us a large wad of money, thus clearly establishing his business credibility.



The Delhi Airport baggage scan, check-in and immigration were fast and hassle-free. Our Singapore Airlines flight to Singapore was full, but before I could even scan the delightful cabin crew I was fast asleep.

At Singapore it was interesting to note the difference in the attitudes of government workers at the airport versus those in India. They smiled; they were not sour and cranky. Here was a country that was interested in tourism.

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23<sup>rd</sup> March 2007  
all enquiries welcome



## BIRD LIST

**Number in first column refers to plate number in Grimm et al**

**Number in other columns represents the trip day number when bird was first seen**

## Mu - Mumbai

## RK - Little Rann of Kutch

**Gir - Gir**

## Vel - Velavadar

## Ran - Ranthambore

## Bh - Bharatpur

**Bvg - Bhandavgarh**

## Kan - Kanha

## Pen - PENCH

**Cor - Corbett**

[illegible]

	BIRD	Mu	RK	Gir	Vel	Ran	Bh	Bvg	Kan	Pen	Cor
17	Brown-headed Barbet						16	21	22	26	30
17	Lineated Barbet										29
17	Blue-throated Barbet										30
17	Coppersmith Barbet	11		6		12	16	20	22	25	31
18	Indian Gray Hornbill						16	20	22	25	30
18	Malabar Pied-Hornbill							21		26	
18	Oriental Pied-Hornbill										30
20	Indian Roller		2	5	9	14	16	20	22	25	30
20	Hoopoe		2		9			20	22	24	
21	Common Kingfisher		2	6				20			
21	Stork-billed Kingfisher									24	
21	White-throated Kingfisher	11	2	6		12	16	20	22	24	30
21	Black-capped Kingfisher									25	
21	Crested Kingfisher										32
21	Pied Kingfisher		2	6		15	16	20			30
22	Green Bee-eater	1	2	5		12	16	20	22	24	30
23	Common Hawk-Cuckoo								22	24	29
24	Asian Koel			6	9		16				
24	Sirkeer Malkoha							20			
24	Greater Coucal		2			15	16	21	22	25	30
25	Alexandrine Parakeet					14		21	22	25	30
25	Rose-ringed Parakeet	1	2	5	9	12	16	20	22	26	29
25	Plum-headed Parakeet			5	9	13		20	22	24	29
25	Red-breasted Parakeet										29
27	Asian Palm-Swift	1				12					
27	House Swift		2			12					
27	Crested Treeswift			6				21		25	29
28	Barn Owl									26	
28	Collared Scops-Owl			5		14		21		25	30
29	Dusky Eagle-Owl						16				
29	Brown Fish-Owl					14		20			
29	Mottled Wood-Owl			6				20			
30	Jungle Owlet							20	22	26	30
30	Spotted Owlet		2	6		14	16		23	26	
30	Little Owl		2								
30	Brown Hawk-Owl						16				
31	Gray Nightjar									25	
31	Sykes's Nightjar		2								
31	Indian Nightjar									25	
32	Rock Pigeon	1	2	5	9	12	16	20			29
34	Oriental Turtle-Dove	1							22		30
34	Eurasian Collared-Dove		2	5	9	12	16		23	24	30
34	Red Collared-Dove		2	5	9	12	16	20			
34	Spotted Dove		2	5	9	12	16	21	22	24	
34	Laughing Dove		2	5	9	12		20	22		30
34	Emerald Dove								22		30
35	Yellow-footed Pigeon			5		12	16	20	22	24	31





	BIRD	Mu	RK	Gir	Vel	Ran	Bh	Bvg	Kan	Pen	Cor
57	Black-bellied Tern		3			15					
57	Whiskered Tern	1									
59	Osprey									25	
59	Black-shouldered Kite		2	5	9	12		20	23		29
59	Black Kite	1	2	5		12				25	29
59	Brahminy Kite	1									
60	White-bellied Sea-Eagle	1									
60	White-tailed Eagle										31
60	Gray-headed Fish-Eagle									25	31
61	Egyptian Vulture						17	20			31
61	White-rumped Vulture							20			32
61	Indian (Long-billed) Vulture					13		20		24	
61	Himalayan Griffon										31
62	Cinereous Vulture										30
62	Red-headed Vulture					14		20	23	24	29
63	Short-toed (Snake) Eagle										30
63	Crested Serpent-Eagle	1		5		15		20	22	25	30
64	Western (Eur) Marsh-Harrier		2		9				23		
65	Northern (Hen) Harrier										31
65	Pallid Harrier		2		9						
66	Shikra	1	2	5	9	14	16		23	24	31
67	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	11		6				20			30
68	Oriental Honey-buzzard			7		15	16			26	
68	White-eyed Buzzard					14		21	22	25	
69	Greater Spotted Eagle				6						
70	Tawny Eagle	11					13				
70	Steppe Eagle		4								
71	Bonelli's Eagle							20			
71	Changeable Hawk-Eagle			5		14		20	22		30
72	Eurasian (Common) Kestrel		3		9			20			
74	Peregrine Falcon						16				
75	Little Grebe		2			12	16				
77	Indian Cormorant		2			12	16		23	24	
77	Great Cormorant					13	16	21		25	30
77	Little Cormorant			7		13			23	24	30
77	Darter			6		12	16				
78	Great Egret	1	2	6		12	16		23	24	29
78	Intermediate Egret		2								
78	Western Reef-Heron				9						
78	Indian Pond-Heron	1	2	5	9	15	16	20	22	24	29
78	Cattle Egret		2	6	9	13	16	20	22	24	29
78	Striated Heron			5	9	15					
79	Gray Heron		2	6	9	12	16	20		24	
79	Purple Heron		2				16			25	
80	Little Egret					15					
80	Black-crowned Night-Heron						16				31
81	Black-headed Ibis		2				16				



[illegible]

[illegible]



[illegible]

	BIRD	Mu	RK	Gir	Vel	Ran	Bh	Bvg	Kan	Pen	Cor
142	Citrine Wagtail		2			15				25	
142	Yellow Wagtail		2	6						25	29
142	Gray Wagtail		3	6		14	16		23	25	30
143	Tawny Pipit					15					
144	Tree Pipit	11									31
144	Paddyfield Pipit					15		21	22		31
146	Baya Weaver		2								
146	Red Avadavat								23		
147	Indian Silverbill		2	6		14	16				
147	Scaly-breasted Munia										29
147	Black-headed Munia							20			
149	Common Rosefinch					13					
152	Rock Bunting										29

\* seen at Khajuraho



these are some kind of mammal, other mammals seen are listed below.....



<b>Mammal</b>	<b>Mu</b>	<b>RK</b>	<b>Gir</b>	<b>Vel</b>	<b>Ran</b>	<b>Bh</b>	<b>Bvg</b>	<b>Kan</b>	<b>Pen</b>	<b>Cor</b>
<b>Blackbuck</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>9</b>						
<b>Gaur</b>								<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	
<b>Nilgai</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>16</b>			<b>24</b>	
<b>Chinkara</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>							
<b>Chital/Spotted Deer</b>	<b>11</b>		<b>5</b>		<b>13</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Hog Deer</b>										<b>31</b>
<b>Swamp Deer</b>								<b>23</b>		
<b>Sambar Deer</b>			<b>5</b>		<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Barking Deer/Muntjac</b>							<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>		<b>30</b>
<b>Indian Wild Boar</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>			<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Jackal</b>			<b>8</b>			<b>16</b>			<b>24</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Wolf</b>				<b>9</b>						
<b>Indian Fox</b>		<b>3</b>								
<b>Asiatic Lion</b>			<b>6</b>							
<b>Leopard</b>			<b>5</b>		<b>14</b>				<b>24</b>	
<b>Tiger</b>					<b>14</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>		<b>30</b>
<b>Jungle Cat</b>				<b>9</b>					<b>25</b>	
<b>Common/Indian Grey Mongoose</b>			<b>6</b>			<b>16</b>				<b>32</b>
<b>Small Indian Mongoose</b>							<b>19*</b>			
<b>Striped Hyaena</b>				<b>9^</b>						
<b>Smooth Indian Otter</b>										<b>31</b>
<b>Yellow-throated Marten</b>										<b>32</b>
<b>Ratel</b>			<b>7#</b>							
<b>Sloth Bear</b>								<b>23</b>		
<b>Indian/Rufous-tailed Hare</b>		<b>2</b>						<b>22</b>		
<b>Asiatic Wild Ass</b>		<b>3</b>								
<b>Rhesus Macaque</b>	<b>11</b>					<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Bonnet Macaque</b>	<b>1</b>									
<b>Common Langur</b>	<b>11</b>		<b>5</b>		<b>13</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Asian Elephant</b>										<b>31</b>
<b>Five-striped Palm Squirrel</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Indian Flying-Fox</b>				<b>9</b>				<b>22</b>	<b>24</b>	
<b>Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat</b>				<b>9@</b>						
<b>Asiatic Greater Yellow-bellied Bat</b>						<b>16</b>				
<b>Indian Horseshoe Bat</b>							<b>21</b>			
<b>Theobald's Tomb Bat</b>							<b>21</b>			

## **Notes on some of the mammal sightings**

**Blackbuck:** The only site that would guarantee a sighting of this beautiful antelope on our itinerary was Velavadar NP and the areas surrounding it. Whilst it appears on the mammal list for most other parks, they are either rare, outside the tourist areas or extirpated.

**Gaur:** Common in Kanha and Pench where they were seen on almost every jeep safari, sometimes with two or three sightings per safari. Unlike their cousins in SE Asia or Nepal, the gaur here were very tame, even to the point of refusing to move for vehicles.

**Chinkara:** This animal was listed for many parks but they are shy and uncommon. We saw a small herd at the Wild Ass Sanctuary (at the wild ass site) in the far distance and a small group just on the Bhavnagar side of the Gir Forest in some fields.

**Swamp deer:** Easily seen at Kanha where there are about 340 animals. There was a fence being built for a breeding project at the time of our visit.

**Jackal:** Although we were excited to see our first jackals, they were easily seen at a number of locations.

**Wolf:** A difficult animal to find anywhere but for the moment Velavadar might be the easiest site in the world for wolf. We managed three + inside the fenced area of the reserve and then a single animal out side of it on the road that leads to the reserve from the main road. A day spent in and around Velavadar should give a high likelihood of success.

**Asiatic Lion:** There are allegedly 300+ lions restricted to Gir NP. We managed one sighting of two animals in a total of five jeep safaris, so they are by no means guaranteed. Our guides suggested we were a little unlucky not to see more. Whilst the locals denied it, we read in the newspaper that some poachers were killing lions for their claws.

**Forest Leopard:** We managed to see different individuals of these awesome animals on four consecutive safaris in Gir NP. There said to be over 300 in Gir. They were more common near the edges of the park or outside of it. We had great views of one in Ranthambore, where they are difficult to see on account of competition from tigers. Prolonged views of a sleepy leopard were enjoyed at Pench NP, where apparently they are not easily seen.

**Tiger:** We managed tiger at four of the five tiger reserves we visited, missing out only at Pench. Of 16 jeep safaris I saw tigers six times. We may have seen more but on many safaris we were looking in other areas for other things. Whilst Bhandavgarh is probably the best place to see one we were restricted in our movements there by the tiger-induced death of a villager. Kanha should almost guarantee sightings, as some of the poor bloody things are radio-collared. Ranthambore had over 30 tigers but if you get a bad run of route allocations you could miss even getting the chance to see one. Corbett has many tigers and although the one we saw there was outside the park I think we were unlucky not to see any in the core area.

**Jungle Cat:** Apparently fairly common. One was seen well at Velavadar where the guide expressed no surprise at the sighting. There were two kittens in the grounds of our lodge at



Pench (Pench Jungle Camp) as well as good daylight views of an adult walking across the road in Pench.

**Striped Hyena:** Although allegedly widespread the only site where we had a glimpse was at Velavadar where Max and the guide saw a small group in long grass. One was seen by my friend Jon Hall just after our visit so this would be the place to see them.

**Smooth Indian Otter:** A group was seen well in Corbett. Apparently they are not too difficult in the big rivers within the park.

**Ratel:** Our guide was scouting ahead for lions in Gir NP when he flushed a ratel but by the time he sent word and we ran to the site it had disappeared over a ridge into a part of the park we were not allowed to enter. Apparently they are very rarely seen at Gir with one guide of eight year's experience having never seen one.

**Sloth Bear:** Crap views of one lumbering off in long grass in Kanha. We were a little early in the bear season as many would have still been hibernating.

**Asiatic Wild Ass:** Guaranteed at the Wild Ass Sanctuary where their numbers are on the increase with over 4000 animals.

**Bonnet Macaque:** Guaranteed on Elephanta Island, Mumbai where they are numerous tame.

**Asiatic Elephant:** Seen at Corbett where they are reasonably common.

**Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat:** Common within the Jain temples at Palitana (Gujarat).

**Indian Horseshoe Bat:** Easily seen within the Buddhist temples in Bhandavgarh.

**Asiatic Greater Yellow-bellied Bat:** Seen in the courtyard of the Laxmi Palace Hotel (thanks to Jon Hall)

**Theobald's Tomb Bat:** Easily seen within the entrance gate to Bhandavgarh Fort.