

Central India

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 to Rajkot & Gir National Park

After an overnight flight to Mumbai we'll catch a short flight north to Rajkot, arriving mid-afternoon on Day 2. We'll travel straight to the Birder's Lodge at Gir and settle in for a three night stay.

Days 3 - 5 Gir National Park

World-famous as the last stronghold for the critically endangered Asiatic Lion Gir is also home to a rich community of birds and animals. For most visitors the Lions do take centre-stage, however visitors are still relatively few so we'll have plenty of chance to get to know these impressive cats without having to jostle for space. Maldhari cattle herders have several settlements inside the park and graze many thousands of cattle within Gir's confines and these cattle are a significant source of food for the Lions. Not surprisingly there is an uneasy truce between the lions and the herders and any increase in people and cattle in the park is likely to have a detrimental impact on what is currently the healthiest population for a century. A hundred years ago there were just twenty left and now there are over three hundred. There are a similar number of Leopards and chances of a sighting of these powerful cats are quite high.

Of course with such high predator numbers one needs lots of herbivores. Sambar and Spotted Deer are common and very visible whilst Wild Boar are positively abundant. There are also good populations of Nilgai, Indian Gazelle, and Porcupines, the latter a favourite target of the Leopards. We'll also hope to see Jungle Cats and Golden Jackals, Hanuman Langurs and Black-nape Hares, as well as the reserve's large populations of Mugger Crocodiles.

Sarus Cranes stalk the grasslands and we'll see Grey Francolins, Rock Bush Quail and the strange Black Ibis as Crested Serpent Eagles and Changeable Hawk Eagles call noisily overhead. Beautiful Painted Sandgrouse make a fine sight as the dawn sun lights them on the riverbank by the lodge. Here there is excellent birding with Rufous Treepies and Yellow-footed Green Pigeons offering fine photographic opportunities as Coppersmiths Barbets, Black-headed Cuckooshrikes and both Common and Marshall's loras feed in the waterside trees. Asian Paradise, Black-naped Monarch, White-browed Fantail, Grey-headed, Verditer and Tickell's Blue are among the Flycatchers seen around the lodge! The riverbanks offer a great variety of Odonata. We'll encounter Libellago lineata, the Black-winged Bambootail, the Orange-faced Sprite, both Indigo and Dancing Dropwings, and hopefully some of the less common species such as Golden Dartlet and Yellow Waxtail. Out in the park we'll encounter both Grey-headed and Pallas's Fish

Eagles as well as Long-billed Vulture, Red-headed Vulture, Steppe Eagle, Imperial Eagle, Osprey, Peregrine, Laggar Falcon, Red-headed Falcon, Oriental Honey Buzzard and White-eyed Buzzard. Afternoon of Day 5 we'll travel to Bhavnagar and spend the night there.

Day 6
Velavadhar

North of Bhavnagar are the beautiful savannah grasslands of Velavadhar, popularly known as Blackbuck National Park. Over 3500 of these elegant creatures inhabit just thirty-four square miles so our chances of seeing them are good! The males are splendid creatures all dressed in black and tan and with sinuous twisting horns. Early morning will provide the best light for photography of these charismatic antelope and will also offer the best chance of encountering the rare Lesser Florican and seeing the impressive numbers of Montagu's, Marsh and Pallid Harriers that will have spent the night in the World's largest harrier roost.

Days 7 - 9
Little Rann of Kutch Wildlife Sanctuary

We can now explore the amazing landscape of the Little Rann of Kutch, a name redolent of 'somewhere else-ness'. One of the largest sanctuaries in India, the Little Rann of Kutch wildlife sanctuary spreads over 4950 sq km and safeguards a range habitats from saline desert plains, arid grasslands, rocky and thorn scrub to lakes and marshes. It is home to millions of waterfowl along with desert birds such as bustards and sandgrouse and is the last refuge of the Khur, the Indian subspecies of Asiatic Wild Ass. These have been doing rather well of late and we are sure to see small herds of these charismatic and speedy animals during our stay.

For much of the year the area is a vast swamp, drying out to a desert-like scene interrupted by lagoons and small islands of vegetated land known as 'baits'. Large flocks of Demoiselle Cranes and Common Cranes favour these areas and in the lagoons there are plenty of Great White, Dalmatian and Spot-billed Pelicans. The Lesser Flamingo breeds in the Little Rann and in winter is joined by vast flocks of Greater Flamingoes too. Painted, Openbill, Woolly-necked, White and Black-necked Storks are part of a panoply of impressively large birds that make the Little Rann their home. With abundant wildfowl come birds of prey, especially Steppe, Tawny and Greater Spotted Eagles, all of which are common. Both Large and Small Salmon Arabs, pretty little butterflies both, flutter about the Salvadora bushes and we'll see a Common Grey Mongoose out on the hunt.

Though the Wild Ass is the best known of the Rann's mammals there are thriving populations of Indian Gazelle and Blue Bull and this is one of the best places to seek out the globally threatened Indian Wolf, recently split from other wolves as a distinct species. Bengal Foxes, Jackals and Jungle Cats seek prey at dawn and dusk as Indian Coursers scurry across the cool ground and flocks of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse fly in to drink. We'll search for the shy MacQueen's Bustard in

the sparse grasslands also inhabited by three species of Bustard-Quail as well as Savanna and Syke's Nightjars. Scarcer animals we'll try for outside the reserve at night include Desert Cat and Striped Hyena. In the evening of Day 9 we'll catch the overnight train from Ahmedabad to Jabalpur, in the heart of India.

Day 10
Train to Jabalpur

The journey to the centre of India is a long one and after a night on the train it'll not be until early afternoon on Day 10 that we'll arrive into Jabalpur. From there it is a four hour road journey to the magnificence of Kanha.

Days 11 - 17
Kanha National Park

The geographical heart of India, this region was the inspiration behind Rudyard Kipling's Junglebook. Kanha is one of India's national treasures. Ancient volcanic hills form a high cordon around a central valley occupied by wide grasslands ('maidans') and wonderful Sal Forest. The hills themselves are covered in a rich and diverse vegetation and topped by flat grasslands quite different in character from the valleys below. The combination is a scenic masterpiece which contains abundant and very visible wildlife, so much so that Kanha is probably the prime location in India for mammal photography. A Project Tiger Reserve since 1973 Kanha has had great success in both securing the future locally of the Tiger and providing opportunities for visitors to see this most magnificent of mammals.

We'll have daily morning and evening drives, mostly into the park though sometimes into the often equally productive buffer zone. With such a long stay we've given ourselves a very good chance of not just seeing a Tiger, but of having several encounters, hopefully some of which will provide memorable photographs, for these Tigers are not particularly shy. We'll likely encounter Tigers on several occasions from the jeeps and will also ride on Elephant back with a mahout looking for them. Park rangers locate a Tiger and once the big cat is settled in an area the mahouts take people on elephant back to see this most beautiful and awe-inspiring of all cats. Perhaps surprisingly some of the best Tiger photo opportunities are likely to be from Elephant back. We'll likely see Golden Jackals daily, whereas Bengal Fox is much less common, and India Wolf decidedly rare. The Asian Wild Dog or Dhole has one of its strongholds in Kanha and though we are certainly not guaranteed a sighting over the course of six days we definitely have a good chance.

Seventy years ago, the Kanha region harboured teeming populations of the impressive Barasingha, a hard ground relative of the Swamp Deer of the sub-Himalayan floodplains. Numbers plummeted from over 3000 to just 66 in 1970. Thankfully the protection afforded by the reserve and changes in agricultural practise outside have resulted in numbers climbing and there are now more than 500. A majestic deer with large antlers they favour the open meadows and marshy

areas just inside the Mukki Gate and we'll get to know them well as we go in and out. The males can often be seen with veritable haystacks on their heads as they sweep up tall dried grasses from around the ponds with their multi-tined antlers. Much more abundant throughout the park are Sambar and Chital while Munjac are frequently seen in the wooded areas. The many ponds and tanks throughout Kanha inevitably attract us. There's always so much going on at these whether it be animals drinking or Muggers and Terrapins sunbathing, perhaps a cat lounging as the mid-morning sun warms up, and always lots of birds. Lesser Whistling Teal are abundant and we'll see Citrine Wagtails, Oriental Darters and Woolly-necked Storks. Careful searching might reveal Pythons draped over waterside branches or a Spectacled Cobra looking all silver and shiny. Overhead we should look for Changeable Hawk-eagles, Steppe Eagles and Bonelli's Eagles.

We'll pause often and enjoy the characteristic birds of Kanha's forests. Racket-tailed Drongos are noisy and obvious and so too woodpeckers that include colourful Black-rumped Flamebacks, Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers and Streak-throated Woodpeckers. Brightly coloured Orange-headed Ground Thrushes are always a delight to see and we'll look for another beautiful songster, the uncommon and shy White-rumped Shama. We'll see roosting Spotted Owlets and Indian Scops Owls. A rustling of leaves reveals Red Junglefowl and sometimes the gorgeous Painted Spurfowl. Brown-cheeked Fulvettas, Puff-throated Babblers and Indian Scimitar Babblers reward those that look closely at the understorey. The canopy of the bright green Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests are alive with Scarlet Minivets, Black-headed Orioles, Plum-headed Parakeets, White-bellied Drongos and Oriental Turtle Doves. Flycatchers are abundant in the forest and include such colourful species as Ultramarine, Verditer and Tickell's Blue as well as the lovely Asian Paradise Flycatcher. The brilliant colours of Blue-capped Rock Thrushes and shimmering blue highlights of Malabar Whistling Thrushes may come into focus amongst the Biju, Haldu and Dhaora trees that populate rocky ravines on the ascent to the high plateaux. Known as 'dadars, these are formed on bauxite deposits capping volcanic basalt that forms the hill country hereabouts. Spring lines follow the discontinuity between the two rock types and these are good areas to look for abundant Blue Bull and the impressive Gaur or Indian Bison which is present in some numbers in Kanha. The dadars are home to Pied Harriers, Blyth's Pipits, Barred Buttonquail and Tawny-bellied Babblers. These areas are seldom visited by the Tiger-seeking tourist and so are largely undisturbed and thus there's a good chance of coming across some of the more rarely seen mammals of the park such as Jungle Cat and Chowsingha or Four-horned Antelope. The latter are devilishly difficult to find in the thick grasslands but thankfully we've found that they graze at night very close to the lodge in dry cockscomb scrub! In fact the Baagh is in a superb area for wildlife and we'll see much in the lodge environs. Large Cuckooshrikes, White-rumped Vulture, White-bellied drongo and Jungle Owlet can all be seen within the grounds. Butterflies are numerous with Plain and Common Tigers, Common Rose and the striking Common Jezebel frequent brilliantly-hued Bougainvilleas that drape over the lodge's walls. Skittering Frogs and colourful dragonflies are around the lodge's pond. Indeed the variety of Odonata during the stay at Kanha is really quite impressive with some lovely

species such as the Blue Sprite, Green Skimmer, Pink Skimmer, Tramea limbata, the striking Crimson Dropwing and the Asian Pintail amongst many others. Yellow-wattled Lapwings and European Stone Curlews inhabit nearby fields and ponds covered in Lotus and Fringed Waterlilies host Sarus Cranes, Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Grey-headed Lapwing and Bay-backed and Long-tailed Shrikes.

And the cast of Jungle Book? We'll we think you'll have see all but Mowgli by now! But maybe Baloo will have given you the slip in which case you'd better keep your eyes open on the way to the airport on the last day... it'll take us about four hours to reach Nagpur Airport which we depart in the evening of Day 17.

Day 18
Return to the UK

The flight from Nagpur takes us to Mumbai where we'll connect with our onward flight to the UK arriving morning of Day 18.

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