

Assam & Bhutan

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 To Delhi

Day 2 to Guwahati & Kaziranga

Our flight lands in India in the morning and connects through to Guwahati, the internal flight skirting the southern edge of the great Himalayan Mountains to the north. If the weather is clear, which it normally is, we'll have fabulous views of many of the world's highest peaks including Kanchenjunga and Everest. As we descend into Assam the immense braided channel of the Brahmaputra spreads out before us.

The landscape is very exotic. Tea grows by the roadside and unfamiliar crops back onto patches of forest decorated with the striking red flowers of Silk Cotton Trees. The snowy Himalayas rise to the north and to the south the mighty Brahmaputra is hemmed in by the Patkai Range - it is a tremendously scenic place. By rivers and in forest we'll find beautiful Scarlet Minivets and Blue-throated Barbets whilst brilliantly coloured butterflies such as Great Eggfly and Bluebottle flutter across the quiet roads. Our first mammal sightings are likely to be around dusk as we reach Kaziranga - a roadside Sambar or perhaps a Small Indian Civet scurrying across the road. We'll settle into the lovely Infinity Resort for a six night stay. This hotel is both superbly comfortable and an ideal base to explore the wonders of Kaziranga and the varied habitats that surround it. The hotel is surrounded lush greenery alive with birds and butterflies and when not out on morning or afternoon trips we can relax and enjoy the rich variety of species found within metres of the rooms and their lovely balconies.

Days 3 - 7 Kaziranga National Park

Downriver lies magnificent Kaziranga - a fabulous mosaic of grasslands, forests and pools backed by misty hills and everywhere decorated by the bright red blooms of Silk Cotton Trees. This atmospheric scene provides a superb backdrop for close-up encounters with Great Indian One-horned Rhinos and Wild Indian Elephants. Both species are numerous and we're sure to encounter each daily. Kaziranga is much less heavily visited than parks further west in India so other vehicles are a relatively infrequent sight allowing us plenty of opportunities for photography. We will get close to mother-calf pairs of Rhinos and also to wild Indian Elephants, indeed sometimes to both species at once! Elephant-back rides take us to within metres of the Rhinos. Bengal Floricans erupt from grass and sleepy Wild Boar shuffle away from our elephant's feet as dawn mists ripple above herds of Barasingha (Swamp Deer). Back in the jeeps we'll stop at bheels (shallow lakes) where groups of cavorting Smooth-coated Otters will be a daily sight. Black-necked Storks hunt

frogs in the short grasslands whilst Spot-billed Pelicans fish in deeper water. There are several superb watchpoints scattered throughout Kaziranga and we're allowed out on foot at these. Some rangers at these watchpoints have domesticated cats that look about 75% Jungle Cat - we should see the real thing out hunting as well! There are plenty of Tigers here (apparently 86 at the last count) though we've perhaps only a one in three chance of seeing them! Hog Deer, one of their main prey items, are numerous. Pallas's and Grey-headed Fish Eagles soar over bheels that are full of fish and frogs, and these are joined by numerous other birds of prey including Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, and Oriental Hobby. Wild Water Buffalo with spectacular arcing horns wade past Openbill Storks and Lesser Adjutants. 'Mistletoes' attract pretty Scarlet-backed and Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers and orange-flowered creepers the lovely Crimson Sunbird. Huge flocks of Chestnut-tailed and Spot-winged Starlings feed in Silk Cotton Trees often with Short-billed Minivets and Gold-fronted Leafbirds.

Many beautiful butterflies congregate along streams that descend from the hills behind our lodge. Red-spot, Pale and Painted Jezebels flaunt their bold colours whilst Red-spot Duke and Popinjay frequent rocky nullahs. Lemon, Yellow, Blue and Peacock Pansies flutter along waysides. Autumn Leaf and the stunning Cruiser flash brilliant orange and there's a whole stack of sailor species here. Glorious Blue-bearded Bee-eaters and Green-billed Malkohas are perhaps only eclipsed by bright Green Magpies and the skulking Blue-naped Pitta for sheer beauty.

Day 8 into Bhutan and to Gelephu

We'll journey across the plains of Assam this morning and to the Bhutanese border crossing at Gelephu on the edge of Royal Manas National Park.

Near Guwahati is some superb butterfly habitat with a wonderful array of species - from the Pallid Nawab to the White-edged Blue Baron and from the Lime Butterfly to the Dark Judy! En route Orange Leaf Butterflies join Blue Glassy Tigers and Broadstick Sailors on flowery road margins as we drive towards the mighty Brahmaputra River where we'll hope to see Ganges River Dolphins. Little streams attract spectacular tailed blues like the Common Imperial and the Yamfly as well as the Commander, Map Butterfly and the huge Great Mormon.

Days 9 & 10 Royal Manas National Park: Tingtibi & Zhemgang Monastery.

Manas is one of the most biologically diverse location in all of Asia. Habitats range from the grasslands of the Brahmaputra plain to mossy oak forests at 2000m as the Bhutanese hills rise into the snowy Himalaya.

We start in Tingtibi in forests that offer a tremendous opportunity to observe rarely seen and often little-known fauna. The sensational vocalisations of Large Scimitar Babblers will awake us each dawn and at night Mountain Scops Owls and Collared Owlets serenade us around the hotel. Capped Langurs and Assamese

Macaques enjoy fruiting wild mango trees as do some fantastic hornbills. The Great Hornbill is a truly magnificent bird, the swan-like whoosh of its wings telling of their approach from afar. Brown and Rufous-necked Hornbills also come to feed whilst at fig trees we'll encounter a multitude of colourful birds ranging from Fairy Bluebirds to Beautiful Sibias and from yellow and black Sultan Tits to Streaked Spiderhunters. Stands of bamboo are home to specialists such as the Bay Woodpecker, White-browed Piculet, Rusty-fronted Barwing and White-hooded Babbler whilst undergrowth is frequented by fabulously diverse babblers, fulvettas and laughingthrushes. On the forest floor are Grey Peacock Pheasants and several species of cryptically marked Wren-Babblers.

We'll visit the beautifully-sited Zhemgang Monastery where we'll gain a small insight into the life and traditions of this Buddhist country. The quiet roadsides around Zhemgang take us through gorgeous mossy forest home to so many of Bhutan's more beautiful birds. We'll hope to see the aptly-named Beautiful Nuthatch as well as rare Black-throated Parrotbills and flocks of gorgeous Long-tailed Broadbills. Dappled sunlight will reveal goldenforks, maplets, Fluffy Tit and the gorgeous Purple Sapphire, a picture in iridescent blue-purple and bright gold. Metre-long Yellow-throated Martens climb silkily up trees and as our eyes move up through the foliage we'll see the fabulous Green Cochoa, burnished Golden Babbler and gorgeous Red-tailed and Blue-winged Minlas, whilst at the top perch immaculate Pied Falconets on the lookout for a dragonfly meal. Spotted Sawtooths are a Jezebel mimic and we might see these as well as Red-base Jezebels. Other butterflies likely to be seen are Common Batwing, White-bordered Copper, the Circe, Common Leopard, Courtesan, Indian Purple Emperor, and the Punchinello.

Assamese Macaques are common along the roadsides and we'll likely glimpse a Red Muntjac or two. At night we'll seek Hodgson's Porcupines and the fabulous Bhutan Giant Flying Squirrel. In the daytime the bird life will continue to amaze with endless new species such as Rufous-bellied Niltava, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, Asian Barred Owlet, Pin-tailed Green Pigeon, Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker, Rufous-necked Laughingthrush, Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush, Hodgson's Redstart, Whiskered Yuhina, Spot-throated Babbler and Lesser Shortwing.

Days 11 – 15

Royal Manas National Park: Gongphu and Panbang

The trees around our hotel are full of birds. Grey-winged Blackbirds being a feature, and surprisingly common. Great Barbets are noisy, colourful and common, and we'll see Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon, Maroon Oriole, Large Cuckoo-shrike Greater and Lesser Yellownapes, Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, Golden-fronted Leafbird and Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch. Tracks take us through forests where Elephants and Gaur are both still common and we'll encounter both these animals during our stay. Hog Deer are common and often trot off the track as we turn a corner, and troupes of Capped Langurs hardly bother moving as we pass. However it will be another Langur that we'll be keenest to see, the beautiful and rare Golden Langur. Bhutan holds much of the world population of this highly

endangered primate and the one area where they are reasonably common is Manas. We'll see them several times during our visit and can expect good photographic opportunities too. Other mammals we'll encounter will include Sambar, and both Hoary-bellied Himalayan Squirrel and Malayan Giant Squirrel. Lesser and Greater Racket-tailed Drongos scold from treetops whilst Blue Whistling Thrushes hop about the lawns by our guesthouse. Butterflies such as Glassy Tiger, Dark Blue Tiger, Striped Blue Crow, Great Orange-tip and Dark Caerulean come to the abundant nectar produced by a white flowered Buddleia proving an attractive nectar source. Glassy, Dark Blue and Common Tigers; Striped Blue Crow; Great Orange-tip; Dark Caerulean and Purple Sapphire were among the species here.

Red-headed Trogons sit quietly by Panbang's tracks and in the undergrowth we'll find improbably colourful Silver-eared Mesias and tiny almost tail-less Tesias. Rivers are the haunt of Crested Kingfisher and Ibisbill. Wallcreeper and White-capped Water Redstarts frequent the stony banks and by streams we'll encounter no less than five species of fabulous forktails. Fishing Cats leave pawprints on muddy fringes where in daylight many beautiful butterflies such as jokers, oak blues and the lovely Magpie Crow gather to sip salts. Cats are an important if rather elusive component of the mammal fauna of the national park. Tigers and Leopards and indeed Clouded Leopards are all found here though due to the thickly vegetated nature of much of the terrain the chances are we will not see any of them. Leopards Cats are quite common and these we do have a chance of seeing for they hunt along the tracks very close to the hotel, though most likely we'll see them on a night walk. We'll offer a couple of these as it will also give us a good chance to find the Binturong, or Bear-Cat, an impressively thickset arboreal carnivore as well as Common Civets.

Panbang is a great place for butterflies especially along the river banks where we can expect to see Common Imperial, Indian Fritillary and Yellow-Orange-tip. There are swallowtails too such as the ubiquitous Bluebottle and the Lime, and we'll likely see Common Jay, Great Windmill, Common Rose, and the impressive Great Mormon as well. There's also Bright Sunbeam and Western Centaur Oakblue, the Blue Pansy and the Peacock Pansy, and a range of nymphalids including the Cruiser, Great Nawab, the beautiful Leopard Lacewing, and many sailors and their relatives such as Spotted Sailors and Yellow Jack Sailors.

Day 16 to Guwahati and departure

It will take us several hours to get back to Guwahati from where we'll catch our flight to Delhi where we'll have a night in a hotel close to the airport.

Day 17 arrive Europe

Mid-morning we'll head to the airport to catch our flights back to Europe.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our previous tours to Assam & Bhutan. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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