

Tiger Tour India 2010 (or What, no shoe shops, no hair driers, What kind of holiday is this?)

When John asked me to write a few words on his website describing the fantastic trip we had on his Tiger Tour of India, I was a little surprised. We had met him on a cruise to the South Atlantic in February and I had had to admit to him that I had not realised we were actually going to the Antarctic Peninsular. So with this in mind forgive me if I forget something crucial.

There are two things to write about in reviewing any holiday: how well it was organised and the experience itself. As far as the former is concerned it was so professionally organised by John and his partners in India. Every time we arrived at an airport or railway station, hotel or Safari Park, the drivers, vehicles, guides (and bottled water!) were there.

The experience itself is very difficult to put into words. This was our first time in India and we were struggling to take in the chaos, the masses of people, the crazy driving, the cows everywhere and so on. We were introduced to the Delhi style of road traffic rules when our driver, taking us to the airport to fly south on the first morning, missed the turning off the dual carriage way and so did a U turn and went back up the fast lane, into the on-coming traffic, until he had got back to where he wanted to be.

We are not “birders”, Tatiana and I, but going on an animal safari with these people adds an important dimension to the success of the holiday (expedition?). What for me used to be a grey, fluffy blob perched on a telegraph wire now had a name, tended to be very colourful and well worth photographing, particularly if it were in flight.

Site seeing in Delhi. I hate listening to endless tourist guide speeches. No disrespect to them but at school I was far happier doing the raffia at the back of the class than listening to the masters, which is why I have only two qualifications: to drive a boat and drive a car. I am sure Delhi is a wonderful city but I am glad that we were not there for more than a few hours. We flew the next morning to Jabalpur and then drove for five or so hours to the lodge at Bandhavgarh. Fortunately the whole way of Indian life is dictated by the game of cricket. A slow game, full of frustration and yet played with patience. Indian drivers are very much the same. The five hours went by easily as we began to talk to the others in the party. Naturally, on the first safari of the trip, John, being the tiger man, was greeted by a tiger coming towards their jeep on the first morning safari. We met one Indian family (it was the Indian festival of lights - Devali) who had been in the park every day for five days and had not seen a single tiger apart from the tiger hat my wife had bought on Oxford Street. We were obviously in the hands of a god. Mr Tiger himself. John Van de Dol.

Two days later it was time to move on again. This time to Kanha. This is a huge reserve. As with all reserves in India, no littering, no smoking and no getting out of the jeeps. The farmers have been re-located on land adjacent to the reserves but can, at their own risk, graze their cattle inside the reserves. Of course, it is a little known fact that tigers do enjoy the odd take away meal, preferring an Indian to a Chinese. But back to the wild life. Loads of Langur monkeys and Spotted Deer together with wild dogs and a tigress with her three cubs. No Sloth bears that my daughter wanted me to photograph, but Dad cannot provide these things on demand. A sloth bear is no

MP3 player from Curry's, I told her.

Then the highlight of our trip to India (?) - the Taj Mahal. Here is this temple to love and poor old Di was with a man who didn't love her. This vast, immaculately clean space surrounded by the mess of India. All very strange. Very moving but I think it is fair to say that once you have seen it you have no desire to return. We were in India for TIGERS dammit!

Onto Chambal. An oasis of calm Indian countryside where we could relax and wander around the local farm and spot some great looking birds. The Chambal Safari Lodge was very comfortable and the food, as with all the places we had been to was excellent. We could even have an omelete for breakfast to have a break from the normal curry three times a day! The next morning we went on a river safari. Crocs, turtles or was it tortoise. Plenty of bird life all on the mirror like surface of the Chambal river. In the afternoon we drove into Delhi to catch the overnight train north. It sounds so simple. A drive followed by a train journey. Well it was either the last day of Devali or the first day of Hajj. Whichever it was the roads into Delhi were crowded and Delhi Railway Station looked like Hyde Park during the Stones in the Park concert in the seventies. Getting to the platform with a back pack and a suitcase was a battle to survive. There did not appear to be a square inch of platform visible, the smell of urine about bearable until a train moved out and stirred up the air. Suddenly an old man unrolled a small square of carpet. Placed it on the ground, took off his shoes and sat on it fakir style. No one dared walk on his carpet. (travel tip: when travelling by train in India during a festival take a small square of carpet with you). A pickpocket had his hand in Sheila's back pack. I told him stop. He did. Once on the train life settled down again.

Now we were in the foot hills of the Himalayas at the Jungle Lore Birding Lodge. Somehow I think one could be a tourist all your life and fail to find this nirvana. This was a magical kingdom. Some women think that wearing lycra is a right and its not. It's a privilege. The same with visiting this area. We went down to the lake city of Nainital, a place used by the British Raj to get away from the summer heat of Delhi and Bombay. A little retail therapy for our girls in the local market and back to the lodge.

By now we were at day eleven. Our group of nine were getting on well and because the trip was so well organised all we had to do was concentrate on enjoying ourselves. We arrived in Corbet and stayed at the Tiger Camp. Very luxurious although if there had been gin we would have had a gin and tonic, if they had had tonic. Still, nothing wrong with Kingfisher Beer. From here we went into the reserve to stay at the government run Dhikala camp. John was worried it might be very rough but actually it was very good. From here we went for an elephant safari through the jungle. These creatures are wonderful. Atop its back sitting on the upside down table straddling a leg we made our way through the jungle. The elephant grabs food in the way of branches as she walks along and his driver has the splendid job of keeping her in control. He uses a metal bar with a prong sticking out of it and thumps the girl on the head with it to get her attention. It looks cruel but I am not sure that they really feel pain. Perhaps it is to get her respond to his other commands. I have been warned by Tatiana not to try it on her.

On the way back to Tiger Camp we spotted the ninth tiger of the trip. This was really the most satisfying sighting of the holiday. The beast was on the other side of a dried river course from us, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards away and was moving along oblivious to our presence.

Our trip was now coming to an end. These words hardly touch the surface of what a great time we all had. Thank you John.

Charles Watson Dec 2010