

PAWS FOR THOUGHT.....AN ASIAN ADVENTURE

And what an adventure it was too. Having waited a year to finally enjoy this trip I was not disappointed. Frequently scared but not disappointed. I did want an adventure and was bored with the mundane type of holidays I had experienced over the past few years.

We, the intrepid travellers met at the unearthly hour of 0500 to travel to Heathrow. I did have some minor concerns about those I was travelling with as I had only met John, the organiser, a handful of times. He seemed OK, a bit pedantic perhaps.....

The long and tiring journey to New Delhi via Helsinki was soon dispelled by the excitement of being in India, a new experience for me. What an experience! India smelled different, looked different and with an astoundingly varied mixture of humanity. I gaped in amazement as six lanes of traffic attempted to merge into three lanes with nobody giving way, including the rickshaw type vehicles. Every vehicle had degrees of dents and bruises, evidence of the mayhem of New Delhi driving. I fought the impulse to howl with laughter, India was, I believed, going to satisfy my yearning for a new travelling experience.

After a quick shower and breakfast we made our way to Lohti Park and spent a relaxing and pleasant couple of hours looking at the monument to somebody long dead and the local wild life, birds et al. Following a very good lunch at a local club which was hosted by the Indian end of the tour operation we made our way to New Delhi Station for the overnight trip to Katni. More amazement and laughter as we fought our way onto the station platform which contained more humanity than Brighton Beach on a Bank Holiday. The station and platforms packed with a range of humanity I have never seen anywhere else. Different clothes, headdresses, beggars, wealth, skin shades (some painted red or purple) and the inevitable sacred cow walking calmly in between the rail tracks busily eating unknown substances foraged from the cinders.

Four of us shared the sleeping compartment for the overnight journey. We shared a lot of laughter that night - sheer fun, sheer fatigue and the rest to the madness that goes with travelling India by rail. We arrived in Katni at 0500 and made our way, with assistance from porters and our charming guide Lokesh, to two jeeps which were to deliver us to Banhavgarh National Park. Another fascinating journey through poverty stricken villages, shanty type shops and a few colourful buildings of temporary or half built appearance. A population which appeared to live on the roadside – some urinating and others washing their bodies or their teeth. Oblivious to those around them, apart from us – we caused some curiosity with much waving and smiling. An interesting journey on a road which, at times, did have some tarmac and at others only dirt track with an ensuing veil of dust over everything. During this journey I saw my first Rhesus monkeys living in the wild, water buffalo and the, by now, familiar sacred cow. Some excitement was becoming evident by the sightings of birds rare to our environment in the west.....

We arrived at our lodge some two hours later and I admit to relief that it did have the things I was used to i.e. small houses arranged decoratively around the well tended gardens; beds, shower rooms and a western type loo. I did have concerns that John might have arranged for us to go “native” as part of the experience. Having spent two weeks holidaying with John, I am sure this would not have bothered him!

We piled into open jeeps that same afternoon and roared off onto the dusty unmade road to the park. We found our first tiger within half an hour. The blaze of white in the long grass - a barely visible tiger’s face sleeping in the afternoon sun. A mere matter of a hundred yards away. The jeeps slowly lined up as we waited for the tiger to show herself. Eventually she did, sauntering towards us in a calm, confident and unhurried manner. I got the impression she was totally oblivious to us. We were far from oblivious to her. What a magnificent beast – big, proud, powerful and beautiful. A wonderful experience for me as I had never seen a tiger in its natural habitat – only caged in a zoo. We observed this animal for some two hours and then were obliged to race to the gate to avoid the driver and guide from being fined for breaching the closing hour of 1830, but passing another tiger along the way. A tired but contented group returned to the lodge for a couple of “sundowners” around the lodge camp fire.

We had a further two days at Bandhavgarh National Park and tigers were seen each day. On one occasion via elephant ride which took us directly to the resting place of a female tiger which gave us a wonderful photo opportunity. Amazingly, the tigress was totally unperturbed at our unorthodox entry into her world. During the afternoon safari, on the same day, we viewed a mother with two six month old cubs. Again, confident in appearance but gave the impression of avoidance of her audience probably due to the presence of her cubs. I had the feeling she thought “here come the Flintstones” as the jeeps thundered down the tracks to catch a glimpse of her and her family.

There was a wealth of wildlife, mammals and birds in the park most of which I had never seen. Despite the dryness and deciduous nature of the park – being the end of winter – the terrain was different, interesting and varied. We saw Jungle fowl, a variety of eagles such as Serpent and Changeable, a variety of storks including Black, Woolly and Lesser Adjutant, Yellow-wattled and Red-wattled Lapwing, doves, owls, owlets, Coppersmith Barbets, Malabar Hornbills etc and many more mammals such as Sambar, Spotted, Barking Deer and Hanuman Langur Monkeys.

We travelled to Agra to see the Taj Mahal via an air conditioned mini van. Passed the usual (by now) villages on the way. Hot, dusty and sometimes smelly. No roads to speak of, mainly wide dirt tracks full of bumps with sheets of dust flying off the back wheels of passing vehicles. Pleased about the air conditioning – open windows being a near impossibility! Part of the total charm of this holiday was the huge difference from what we accept as “normal”. Interesting to see how others live in a third world country. Even more interesting is the attitude of those who live in enforced conditions of what we would describe as poverty. My perception was a relaxed, warm and welcoming people with a curiosity about their visitors. Bright and smiling children – dressed in scrupulously clean school uniforms but, frequently without shoes.

The Taj Mahal was exactly as you see it on television. Magnificent architecture and beautifully cared for. Luckily we arrived early and avoided the ensuing crowds. To avoid pollution of the monument we were obliged to park some distance away. This necessitated using an electric tuk-tuk – six of us with one hanging on – not me I might add! Well worth the effort and distance to see such an historical and world renowned building. None of us were disappointed. A calm, relaxing place to look and reflect; an oasis in the middle of a mad, noisy and hectic city. Following lunch we made our way to Chambal where we stayed in a charming lodge made up of individual, whitewashed rustic cottages. Such a peaceful place, quiet with only birdsong to listen to. Again, a wonderful variety of birds including Asian Koel, more Barbets, Collared Scops Owls and many more, and later, as soon as night fell, a multitude of Indian Flying Foxes (fruitbats) and a brief view of a Palm Civet.

That afternoon we had a planned river trip in small outboard motorboats. The trip was some three and a half hours long in hot sunshine and silky smooth waters of the River Chambal. I did feel a sense of trepidation prior to this trip. For some reason, I believed it might be dangerous. However, the boats looked new and the river was as flat as glass; very wide but looked “safe”. Accompanied by experienced boatmen and knowledgeable naturalists we set off for what turned out to be an unforgettable afternoon. “Marsh Crocodile” the guide said in a dead pan way. “Where” says I, looking at a mud bank with a long lost and huge lorry tyre curled up on it! “There” he says as the lorry tyre began to move. By now we were about six feet away as the monstrous creature slid towards us and under the water. I felt more than a sense of thrill and excitement as it slid past. In fact I was scared stiff – what if it turned the boat over? Was it a man eater? The guide confirmed my fear “yes, they are man eaters”. Not for the first time I thought, WHY am I here? Nobody else seemed perturbed, so I decided to relax and simply enjoy it. The next view we had was of Gharial Crocodiles. Fish eating, so, nothing to worry me there. These Crocodiles are farm bred and were near to extinction prior to the breeding programme run by the Indian Government. On this river, at least, there are a number of them where they appear to live happily and unhindered. Fascinating to see these rare and unusual animals sitting so silently and without movement on the river banks or sandbanks. Totally still, with the lower jaw in the water and the upper jaw pointing heavenwards. Just waiting for their daily diet to swim by! The river contains an abundant variety of fish, turtles and an even more amazing variety of birds. We were privileged to see flocks of Indian Skimmers. A rare spectacle and so appreciated by us. Travellers from all over the world come to Chambal in the hope of seeing the Indian Skimmer. Many are unlucky, thankfully, we were not. Other birds of interest were Black-bellied Terns, Bonelli’s Eagle, Sarus Cranes and lots of wildfowl and waders including the ridiculous looking Greater Thick-knee.

We travelled to Pangot via an old hunting lodge from the Raj. A piece of Indian architecture in terracotta. Beautifully constructed with large terraces, a fountain and large rooms with four poster beds and equally large bathrooms. Sadly, it did need some attention as the monsoons had done their best. Subsequently, areas of damp had appeared which left the impression of gentile poverty and memories of past glories. In the morning, I found that the water in my bathroom failed to work. After spending an hour or so trying to get somebody to turn it back on, I used the bathroom in the room next door. Needless to say a few irritated words were said over the balcony

which had little to do with Romeo and Juliette! Mornings without a shower are not recommended for me. This is India I was told! Hmm

On to Pangot via Nainital and scenery to challenge the Swiss or Italian Alps. Nainital contains a dam and much of the architecture is of British or at least, European origin. Clean, well tended and familiar to us Westerners. A very good place, for a more standard holiday than ours. The roads leading to Pangot are, to say the least, a trifle primitive! Narrow with concrete boundaries in some areas. We climbed higher and higher and the views became more breathtaking (better at this point not to look too far down – it was a long way to the bottom with the trees the size of match sticks). The lodge in Pangot was comfortable with individual cottages and a separate dining area, shared by the local monkeys, when given the opportunity! The following morning we left camp before dawn to drive to the top of the mountain to see the sun rise over the peaks of the Himalayas. Despite being a veteran skier I have never seen such a beautiful dawn across a mountain range. Bright white snow caps with an increasingly pink glow as the sun rose. Equally breathtaking was the drive to see this spectacle – steep, narrow, no tarmac, lots of boulders and shale.....need I say more? The view will live with me forever despite my vertigo! I would not have missed it.

Onto the Jim Corbett National Park with a very comfortable overnight stay in Tiger Camp. JC Park is huge with Government owned lodges. A tad shabby and run down but bearable. We had already experienced some highlights during this fascinating trip but, for me, the Elephants in this area won my heart, both the domesticated and wild elephants. This was another first for me; to see herds of wild elephants making their way down to the river for a bath and drink. Led by a very lame matriarch, the families wended their way in stolid calm fashion until they heard the jeeps thundering along. In a single movement the elephants completely surrounded the “babies” one of them not more than a couple of months old. We saw a Savanna Nightjar nestled on the ground on the way home that evening – a rare sighting.

The following morning we rose before dawn to travel across the rivers and grasslands on elephant back; in the hope of seeing tigers after a night of hunting or taking their last drink prior to a day of rest. We climbed onto a patient and gentle animal before setting off on a three hour ride. What a ride this turned out to be. I sat on the back of the seating arrangement which resembles an upturned table. Each passenger having a table leg between their legs. As we swayed along the road and down narrow, rubble strewn paths to the river I could hear a low, loud rumbling. Voluminous, constant and odoriferous – the smell of warm, vaguely rancid grass. Oh, I thought, this is where the word “trumping” comes from and, wow, could this elephant trump, We watched the dawn rise over the grassland, pink, misty and intensely beautiful, an artists dream. We did not see tigers that morning but the experience of riding “elephant back” made up for it. What we did see was a wealth of bird life and a variety of deers. Sambar and Spotted Deer being the main types in this area of India. For me, as in Chambal, this was an unforgettable experience and has started a passion for the gentle giant, the Indian Elephant.

We ended our trip in Rivervine after fording fast flowing rivers, in open jeeps, to arrive at a comfortable and well appointed lodge in the middle of a valley surrounded by mountains. Another beautiful area, natural, unspoilt and with wild elephants, tigers and leopards close by. We were warned not to leave the camp after twilight and

to stay in our cottages during the night. Failing to do so could have meant walking straight into one of the above-mentioned mammals, with obvious consequences! As there was no electricity in this camp you could not trust your vision either! This lodge had a glorious chef and, I believe, we had the best food of the entire trip here. We left Rivervine the next morning to return to New Delhi for an overnight stay prior to our return flight. I was more than pleased to stay in the Intercontinental Hotel – five star elegance - total bliss. I have to say our appearance in the marble hall of this hotel was conspicuous. What a dishevelled group we were, dirty, dusty, tired, but from my point of view, fulfilled from an exciting, different and memorable adventure.

Some of us had met briefly prior to this trip. I had only met John van der Dol and had been persuaded, by him, to join this intrepid group. We were made up of three men and five women. A totally mixed bunch of people with different attitudes, beliefs and backgrounds but with a shared interest in nature, wildlife, birds, and mammals. We all got on well and had great fun.

Would I do this again? Most definitely. Put our staid attitudes aside, accept the differences of the cultures of others, accept the potential inherent dangers to enable us to enjoy seeing some of nature's most wonderful animals, in their natural habitat; a variety of bird life unknown on our shores. Why wouldn't I do it again – wouldn't you?

Sheila Poulton

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