



# INDIA

**ABOARD THE MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS • JANUARY 25 - FEBRUARY 10, 2023**



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## BIRDS & CULTURE • ABOARD THE MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS



White-throated Kingfisher © DanHen • Amber Palace, Ganesh Pol © Kevin Standage



In 2001, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours inaugurated a new way to experience the magnificent country of India: a birds and culture tour aboard a luxury train. *Palace on Wheels* was the name of that first departure, an unforgettable journey that served as a springboard for five subsequent outstanding train trips in India. It has now been several years since our last such effort, which is why I take great pleasure in announcing that VENT will operate another India train trip: *India: Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express*, January 25–February 10, 2023. This will be our second trip aboard the *Maharajas' Express*, India's newest and most luxurious train, after our enormously successful trip in 2019.

India is among the world's most compelling countries — for its size, its people, and its spellbinding natural history and cultural heritage. On my first trip to India, over twenty years ago, I developed a great affection for this amazing place. I will never forget going birding on the Delhi golf course near the lovely Oberoi Hotel and seeing a huge billboard at the entrance entitled “Birds of the Delhi Golf Course,” with paintings of over forty birds found on the property, and then being approached by one of the staff who asked me if I wanted to see the Little Owl! That incident occurred shortly before we boarded the *Palace on Wheels* for a train trip that turned out to be one of the best trips we've ever run.

I have now been to India ten times. I love the birding, wildlife, culture, history, and people there. I was fortunate to be introduced to India by Robert Fleming, who grew up in India and co-authored, with his father,

Plum-headed Parakeet © Rich Lindie • Great Hornbill © Sumi



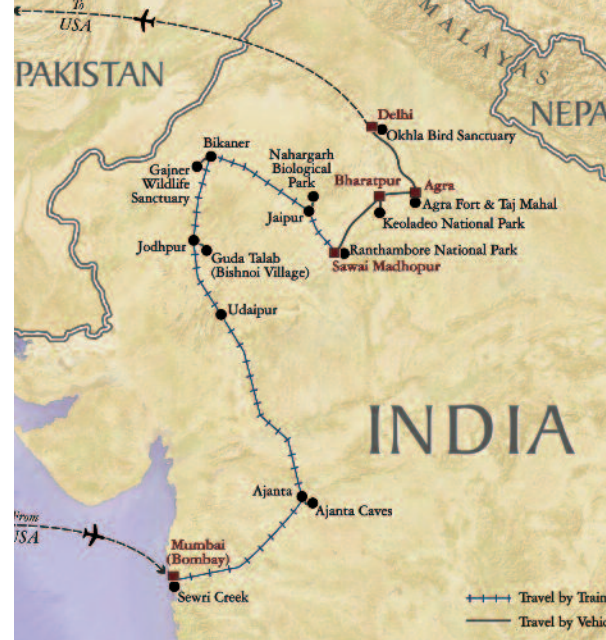
Birds of Nepal (1976), and Raj Singh, the founder of Exotic Journeys, one of the top tour companies in India. They have both become dear friends.

Our itinerary is rich with natural history and cultural and historical offerings. We will travel in supreme comfort while visiting the princely cities of Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Udaipur, a host of wonderful national parks, and the incomparable Taj Mahal.

You will find in India that birds are everywhere, since the people do not kill or trap them. Even in a small village you will see the gorgeous White-throated Kingfisher perched on a telephone wire. Parakeets nest in the walls of fortresses. We will have a good chance of seeing Tigers and a range of other mammals.

We have assembled a superb staff for this trip – Dion Hobcroft, Machiel Valkenburg, Max Breckenridge, Brian Gibbons, and Raj Singh – and we urge you to reserve one of the remaining spaces.

– Victor Emanuel







# Itinerary

January 25-26, Days 1-2

## Travel to Mumbai, India

Night (Day 1): In transit / Night (Day 2): The Oberoi, Mumbai

January 27, Day 3

## Birding excursion to Thane Creek

At 4,100 acres, Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary protects large tracts of mangrove wetlands and mud flats that each winter host flocks of flamingos, a good diversity of shorebirds, waterfowl, and attendant raptors. Every year from October to March, thousands of Greater and Lesser flamingos can be seen here. Beyond the impressive flamingo spectacle, this area is a good place to see birds. We will spend some time exploring the paths and roads that lead from the parking area into the nearby mangrove wetlands and dry forest before enjoying a casual boat ride on the open waters of the inlet. Among the many avian possibilities here are Oriental Darter, Little Egret, Western Reef-Heron, Black-headed Ibis, Greater Spotted Eagle, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Greenshank, Marsh and Curlew sandpipers, Brown-headed and Slender-billed gulls, Whiskered Tern, White-throated Kingfisher, and Large-billed Crow among many others. Night: The Oberoi, Mumbai

January 28, Day 4

## A day in Mumbai: morning birding or sightseeing; afternoon at Prince of Wales Museum

Today, we'll spend the morning around Mumbai, joining either a sightseeing excursion in the city or a birding outing to Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Night: The Oberoi, Mumbai

January 29, Day 5

## Embark the Maharajas' Express; travel to Udaipur

Night: Maharajas' Express

January 30, Day 6

## Udaipur; excursion options; travel to Jodhpur

### Option 1: Udaipur city tour

On this varied sightseeing tour, we'll take in a number of important sites including the City Palace, Crystal Gallery, and Jagdish Temple. The Krishna Vilas hosts a remarkable collection of miniature paintings depicting royal processions, festivals, and games of the Maharanis. The Mor Chowk (Patio of the Peacocks) features unique glass mosaics of peacocks set into the walls, showing the three seasons: summer, winter and monsoon. Night: Maharajas' Express

### Option 2: Birding outside Udaipur (lakes near Menar village)

About thirty miles south of Udaipur, a number of man-made lakes amid the desert environment provide an oasis for a good variety of wetland birds. Among the many species here are Bar-headed and Graylag geese, Comb Duck, Great White and Dalmatian pelicans, Red-naped Ibis, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, White-eyed Buzzard, Eurasian Thick-knee, Yellow-wattled and White-tailed lapwings, Greater Coucal, Asian Koel, Spotted Owlet, Eurasian Hoopoe, Indian Roller, Common and Jungle babblers, Indian Robin, Rosy and Brahminy starlings, Bank Myna, and Purple Sunbird. Night: Maharajas' Express



January 31, Day 7

### **Jodhpur; birding at Guda Talab; city tour; travel to Bikaner**

The fascinating and historically important city of Jodhpur is the former capital of the Marwar region of the modern Rajasthan state and today retains much of its medieval character. Tourists from all over the world who come to Jodhpur not only visit historical monuments but also go to nearby villages to witness the fascinating coexistence of community and wildlife.

Our day will begin with a birding excursion near the Bishnoi village of Guda Bishnoiyan. The Bishnoi community is based on twenty-nine tenets. One of these tenets is protection of wildlife, and the community has played a significant role in the protection of the local ecology. Of the many species possible are such prizes as Demoiselle Crane, Ruddy Shelduck, Greater Flamingo, Painted Stork, Indian Cormorant, Oriental Darter, Black-headed Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, and Black-tailed Godwit.

In the afternoon we will join a walking tour of Jodhpur and visit the imposing Mehrangarh Fort. Begun in 1459 and still run by the Maharaja of Jodhpur, this majestic fort sprawls across a hill 400-feet high and offers dramatic panoramic views across the “Blue City” of Jodhpur (so-called because of the many blue-painted buildings). Inside, a series of courtyards, palaces, and a museum hold a splendid collection of the trappings of Indian royalty, including Rajput miniatures and weaponry. Night: Maharajas’ Express

February 1, Day 8

### **Bikaner; Junagarh Fort; Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary; travel to Jaipur**

We will disembark the train and transfer to historic Junagarh Fort for an interpretive tour before returning to the train for lunch. In the afternoon, we will travel west for birding and wildlife viewing at Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary, and we’ll end the day with dinner amid the great sand dunes of the Thar Desert. Night: Maharajas’ Express

February 2, Day 9

### **Jaipur; excursion options: Amer Fort or Nahargarh Biological Park**

After a leisurely morning aboard the train, we will arrive in the princely city of Jaipur in time for lunch at the City Palace. Excursion options for the afternoon include a visit to Amer Fort or birding and wildlife viewing at Nahargarh National Park.

Jaipur is known as “The Pink City,” a legacy of the rule of Sawai Ram Singh I, when the city was painted pink to welcome the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, in 1876. Today Jaipur is the capital of the state of Rajasthan and its largest city. It is home to two World Heritage Sites as well as palaces, forts, and temples. Night: Maharajas’ Express

February 3-4, Days 10-11

### **Sawai Madhopur; deboard train; Ranthambore National Park**

Our magnificent train journey comes to an end this morning with our arrival in Sawai Madhopur. We will have an afternoon and then a full day in Ranthambore National Park. Among the more interesting birds we may see are Indian Peafowl (their haunting calls provide a constant backdrop to this wonderful place), Jungle Bush-Quail, Gray Francolin, Painted Spurfowl, Black Stork, Oriental Honey-buzzard, Crested Serpent-Eagle, Yellow-footed Green-Pigeon, Greater Coucal, Brown Fish-Owl, White-naped Woodpecker, White-bellied Drongo, White-browed Fantail, Rufous Treepie, Common and White-tailed ioras (the latter a localized endemic), and Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher.







Some of the mammals we may encounter include Leopard, Caracal, Golden Jackal, Sloth Bear, Northern Plains Gray Langur, Wild Boar, Sambar, Spotted Deer, Nilgai, and a host of smaller but nevertheless intriguing mammals. We have a reasonable chance of seeing a Tiger. Nights: The Oberoi Vanyavilas, Ranthambore

February 5-6, Days 12-13

### **Morning transfer to Bharatpur; Keoladeo National Park**

We will have a day and a half walk in the Keoladeo National Park, one of the last major undisturbed *jheels* (wetlands) remaining in north-central India and widely considered one of the greatest birding spots in the entire country. The park supports important nesting colonies of Painted Stork and Asian Openbill, and woodland and semi-desert birds. February is a particularly good time to be here, as large numbers of wintering birds are present in addition to the resident species. Nights: The Bagh Resort, Bharatpur

February 7, Day 14

### **Transfer to Agra; Agra Fort; sunset visit to Taj Mahal**

In the morning we will visit the Agra Fort. After a break and during the afternoon, we will make our first pilgrimage to the legendary Taj Mahal. Clad in white marble, this beautiful mausoleum is universally recognized as one of the greatest of the world's architectural wonders. The gardens surrounding the Taj support a number of interesting birds including River Lapwing, Indian Gray Hornbill, and Coppersmith Barbet. Night: The Oberoi Amar Vilas, Agra

February 8, Day 15

### **Taj Mahal; transfer to Delhi**

Early this morning we will depart the hotel for a sunrise visit to the Taj Mahal. This spectacular construction is worth more than one visit on its own, but seeing the Taj in different moods at different times of the day enriches the experience. We will spend an hour or two here before returning to the hotel for breakfast. After breakfast we will transfer to Delhi, a ride that will take approximately four hours. Night: The Oberoi, Delhi

February 9, Day 16

### **Okhla Bird Sanctuary; p.m. city tour; depart for home**

Today, our final day in India, will consist of a morning-long birding excursion followed by a grand finale tour of Delhi. Night: The Oberoi, Delhi

February 10, Day 17

### **Early morning departure for home**

Flights departing India early this morning arrive in the USA today.



*Those wanting to spend more time in India are encouraged to join our optional pre- and post-tour extensions. Our Kanha National Park Pre-trip offers increased chances for Tigers and a range of birds we won't see on the main tour, while our Kaziranga National Park Extension promises an array of special birds and a pageant of mammals, including Asian Elephant and Indian Rhinoceros.*



## **India: Birds & Culture aboard the Maharajas' Express**

January 25–February 10, 2023 with Dion Hobcroft, Machiel Valkenburg,

Max Breckenridge, Brian Gibbons, and Raj Singh

\$18,895 per person in double occupancy from Mumbai (ends in Delhi)

Limit 40

**\$1,000 discount**

per person (2023 main tour only) for registrations received by  
**September 30**

## **India: Kanha National Park Pre-trip**

January 20–26, 2023 with Dion Hobcroft and Brian Gibbons

\$3,595 in double occupancy from Delhi (ends in Mumbai)

Limit 15

## **India: Kaziranga National Park Extension**

February 10–15, 2023 with Max Breckenridge and a local leader

\$3,775 in double occupancy from Delhi

Limit 15



## **2024 Departure**

### **India: Birds & Culture aboard the Maharajas' Express**

January 31–February 16, 2024

Prices for 2024 departures to be announced

### **Kanha National Park Pre-trip**

January 26–February 1, 2024

### **Kaziranga National Park Extension**

February 16–21, 2024



Dion Hobcroft



Machiel Valkenburg



Max Breckenridge



Brian Gibbons



Raj Singh





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