

**INDIA: BIRDS & CULTURE ON THE
MAHARAJAS' EXPRESS
FEBRUARY 10–26, 2021**

**KANHA NATIONAL PARK PRE-TRIP
FEBRUARY 5–11, 2021**

**KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK EXTENSION
FEBRUARY 26–MARCH 3, 2021**

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There is something indefinable about India which makes westerners who have been there yearn to return. Perhaps it is the vastness of the country and its timeless quality. Perhaps it is the strange mixture of a multiplicity of peoples and cultures which strikes a hidden chord in us, for whom this land seems so alien and yet so fascinating. Or perhaps it is the way that humans and nature are so closely linked, co-existing in a way that seems highly improbable. There are some places in a lifetime that simply must be visited, and India is one of them.

Through the years we have developed an expertise on India train journeys. It all started in 2001 when VENT inaugurated its fabulous Palace on Wheels tour. Subsequent train trips in different parts of the country were equally successful. In 2019, VENT debuted a fabulous new India train tour aboard the beautiful Maharajas' Express. Based on the great success of this trip we will operate this special departure again in 2021! Across a broad swath of west-central India, we will travel in comfort while visiting the great princely cities of Rajasthan state: Udaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaipur; a host of wonderful national parks and preserves; and cultural wonders. Traveling in such style, in a way rarely experienced by modern-day travelers, will take us back in time and into the heart of Rajput country.



Maharajas' Express © Maharajas' Express

The core of the program is a five-night stay aboard the Maharajas' Express, the most luxurious train in India. Embarking in Mumbai, we will receive exposure to a broad cross-section of the Indian landscape as we journey east and north deep into the subcontinent. Each day will be accompanied by fascinating sensual experiences ranging from amazing sights to culinary delights. Our itinerary will appeal to those who seek an expansive travel experience in which birding and natural history activities blend with cultural excursions. Disembarking the train in Sawai Madhopur, our journey will continue by land for another six days until we reach Delhi.

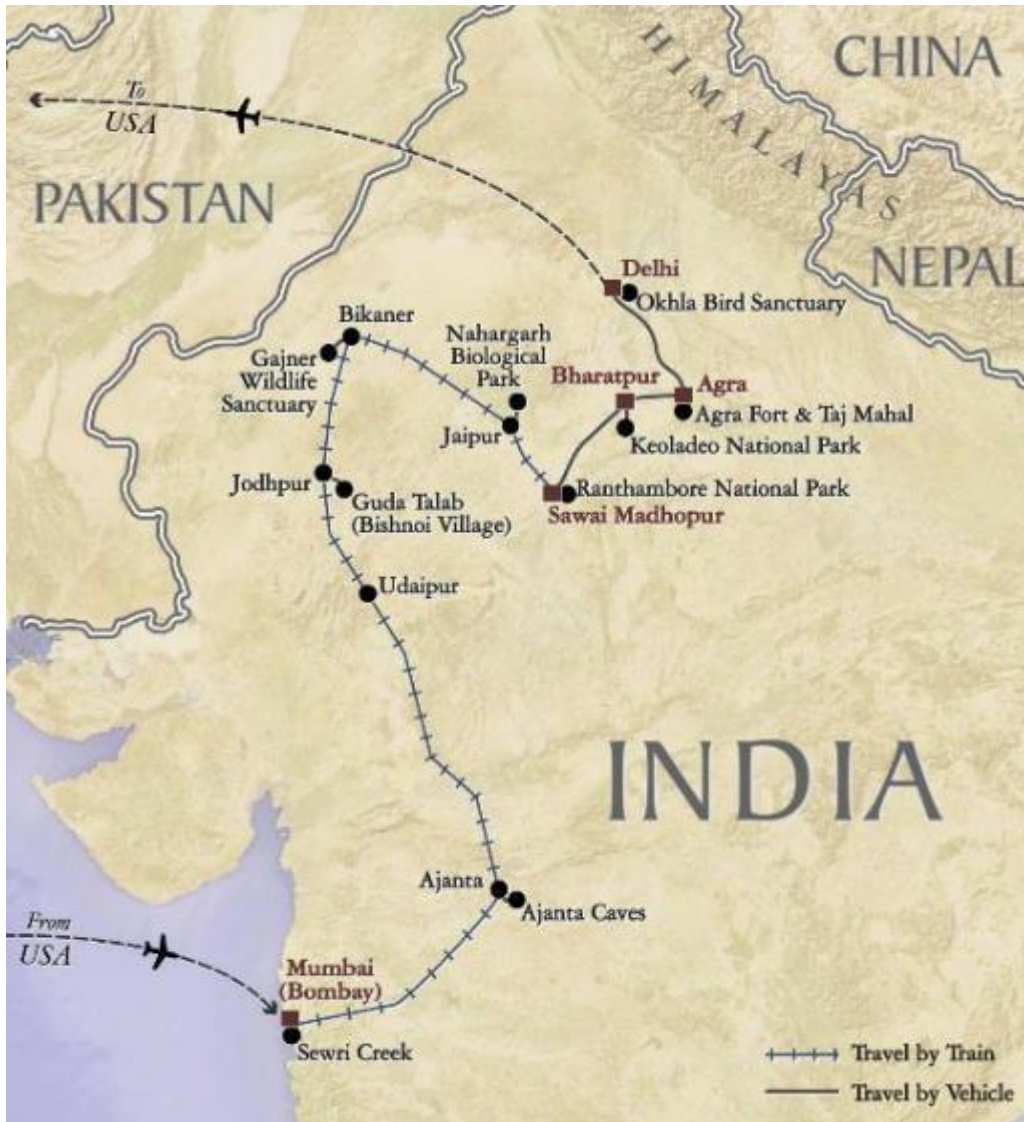
Among the trip's many highlights are visits to Keoladeo and Ranthambore national parks; touring princely palaces, including the incomparable Taj Mahal; and reveling in unforgettable dinners under the stars. Yet India is much more than a series of highlights. It is a total experience. Perhaps no other country provides so rich a panoply of culture intertwined with nature, literally at one's feet. For the photographer, the traveler, the historian, the anthropologist, and most emphatically for the naturalist, India is a veritable dream.



Mayur Mahal Restaurant Car, Maharajas' Express © Maharajas' Express

The Maharajas' Express consists of fourteen guest carriages, each with several passenger suites. Each suite is designed in the manner of a private salon, with plush accommodations adorned with inlays, carvings, tapestries, carpeting, and antique furniture. The train's elegance certainly extends to the dining cars where beautifully prepared meals are served from menus that change daily. The same level of excellence that marks our time on the train will continue on the land portion of the tour, with stays in some of India's finest hotels including several in the superb Oberoi line.

Those desiring an even fuller India natural history experience are encouraged to join optional pre- and post-trip extensions to Kanha National Park and Kaziranga National Park, respectively. Our Kanha National Park Pre-trip visits the largest Tiger reserve in Central India for a chance to observe many species of birds and mammals not possible on the main trip. The extension visits marvelous Kaziranga National Park in the northeastern state of Assam. This park is perhaps best known for its large population of Indian Rhinoceros (Greater One-horned Rhinoceros), but also supports a spectacular collection of other birds and mammals, including Tigers.



February 10–11, Days 1-2: Travel to Mumbai, India. Most flights from North America departing on February 10 will connect to flights arriving Mumbai, India (airport code BOM) in the evening hours of February 11*. Upon arrival in Mumbai (February 11), you will be met by a representative of our ground agent and transferred to our beautiful hotel where a room has been reserved in your name.

*We suggest arriving in Mumbai a day early to allow for potential flight delays and to get rested following the long international flight. VENT will be happy to assist with additional lodging arrangements and transfers should you choose to arrive prior to February 11.

NIGHT: Aboard aircraft in transit to Mumbai (February 10)
Trident Hotel, Nariman Point (Oberoi), Mumbai (February 11)

February 12, Day 3: Birding excursion to Thane Creek. Today, the adventure begins! Prior to boarding the *Maharajas' Express*, we'll spend two days in the Mumbai area, birding and sightseeing. Mumbai is a cosmopolitan city of over 18 million people. It is the commercial capital of India as well as India's largest city.

Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express, Page 5

We will gather in the hotel lobby after breakfast this morning for our first look at India via a birding excursion. The destination of choice will be the Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary.

Thane Creek (Thane is pronounced Tōn-Ā) is located in South Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra; the creek is a short inlet of water that projects inland from the eastern side of the Arabian Sea. At 4,100 acres, the sanctuary protects large tracts of mangrove wetlands and mud flats that each winter hosts 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. Our strategy will be to 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. The boat ride will last for about an hour and will bring exposure to many species of waterbirds. Among the many avian possibilities of our time in the field 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.

Depending on the time of our boat trip, we will either return to the hotel for lunch or bring our lunches, prepared by the hotel, with us.



Greater Flamingos (front) and Lesser Flamingos (rear), Thane Creek © Machiel Valkenburg

NOTE: Because the boat ride at Thane Creek is central to this excursion, the timing of our visit is entirely dependent on the tides. Our plan initially is to visit the site in the cooler morning hours, which may leave time for another activity in the afternoon. However, if the tides are not conducive for the boat ride, i.e. too low, we'll need to adjust our schedule, which means waiting until the tides are right. It is for this reason that we have allotted the entire day for this activity. Moreover, because traffic in Mumbai can be especially heavy, extra time could come in handy.

NIGHT: Trident Hotel, Nariman Point (Oberoi), Mumbai

February 13, Day 4: A day in Mumbai: Morning Mumbai city tour or birding at Sanjay Gandhi National Park; afternoon at Prince of Wales Museum. We will spend the entire day today around Mumbai. In the morning, participants may choose to join either a city tour of Mumbai or a birding outing to Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Both groups will reconvene for lunch, after which time everyone will visit the Prince of Wales Museum.

Option 1: Mumbai city tour

After breakfast we'll depart the hotel for a tour of Mumbai, India's largest and most populous city. Highlights include major sights such as the Gateway of India, a 262-foot-high gateway overlooking the sea built to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911; the Bombay High Court, in the Gothic architectural style; Flora Fountain; and Mani Bhavan, Ghandi's Mumbai headquarters for seventeen years. Also of considerable interest are the famous Dhobi Ghat and Dabbawalas which we hope to observe.

The "dhobi" is a traditional laundryman who will collect your dirty linen, wash it, and return it neatly pressed to your doorstep. The laundries are called "ghats," row upon row of concrete wash pens, each fitted with its own flogging stone. The clothes are soaked in sudsy water, thrashed on the flogging stones, then tossed into huge vats of boiling starch and hung out to dry. Next, they are ironed and piled into neat bundles. The most famous of these Dhobi Ghats is at Saat Rasta near Mahalaxmi Station, where almost two hundred dhobis and their families work together in what has always been a hereditary occupation.

The "dabbawalas" provide the most unique of Mumbai services, amazing in magnitude as well as precision. Their service is basically to supply lunch to all the workers and students of Mumbai. Approximately 4,000 dabbawalas supply lunch to more than 160,000 people daily. Each lunch is packed into "dabbas" (stainless- steel round-shaped boxes) and delivered door-to-door by dabbawalas through carry-carts, bikes, trains, and buses. It is renowned the world over as the world's most ingenious meal distribution system.

Option 2: Birding at Sanjay Gandhi National Park

Sanjay Gandhi National Park is a large protected area within the confines of Mumbai's greater metropolitan area. Given the size of Mumbai, the presence of a 40-square mile park like this is quite remarkable. As such, it is also a place that receives heavy visitation. For those who desire a morning birding outing, we'll depart the hotel early so as to beat the peak traffic time. Walking on trails through the protected forest, we should see a pleasing variety of widely distributed Indian birds like Indian Gray Hornbill, Coppersmith Barbet, Rose-ringed Parakeet, and a variety of drongos like Greater Racket-tailed and White-bellied drongos. Here, there is also a chance for several specialty birds more characteristic of western India such as Orange Minivet, and Purple-rumped, Vigor's, and Long-billed sunbirds.



Rose-ringed Parakeet © Machiel Valkenburg

After a sumptuous lunch at a good restaurant, we'll visit the Prince of Wales Museum.

Constructed in the early twentieth century, the Prince of Wales Museum is considered one of the most significant museums in India. Owing to its stately Indo-Saracenic architectural style, it is one of Mumbai's revered Heritage structures. The museum takes its name from the commemoration of King George V's first visit to India in 1905, while he was still Prince of Wales. The museum is divided into three separate parts to showcase the archaeology, artistic, and natural history treasures of India, Tibet, Nepal, and other far eastern countries. Wandering among the galleries will bring exposure to priceless collections of ancient artworks and artifacts. Among the many interesting items is a very fine collection of sculptures; decorative artworks made from wood, metal, jade, and ivory; and a rare collection of miniature paintings. The natural history section of the museum includes a collection of reptiles, mammals, amphibians, birds and fishes.

NIGHT: Trident Hotel, Nariman Point (Oberoi), Mumbai

February 14, Day 5: Embark the *Maharajas' Express*; travel to Udaipur. Following breakfast, we'll transfer to the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel to complete the registration and check-in process for the *Maharajas' Express*. We will then transfer to the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus where we will board the train and enjoy a welcome beverage. The *Maharajas' Express* will depart the station sometime in the late morning or around mid-day.

After lunch we will have plenty of time to settle into our private rooms and begin familiarizing ourselves with life aboard the train! Through the afternoon and night, the train will make its way north to Udaipur, the first of the three princely cities we'll visit on the trip, passing by numerous villages and towns set in a semi-arid landscape.

NIGHT: Aboard Maharajas' Express

February 15, Day 6: A day at Udaipur: Udaipur city tour or birding at Menar; travel to Jodhpur. This morning we will awake in the picturesque region of Mewar (a region of south-central Rajasthan state), one of the most popular and royal states of the Rajputana (a historic region of India that consisted mainly of the lands encompassed in the present-day Indian state of Rajasthan). We'll enjoy a leisurely breakfast aboard the train while admiring views of the Aravali Hills as the train arrives into the station at Udaipur.

Udaipur—variously known as the “City of Lakes,” “City of Sunrise,” and “Jewel of Mewar”—is a lovely image of white marble palaces, placid lakes, and green hills. It is an oasis of color in a stark and arid region. Picturesque havelis, ghats, and temples along Lake Pichola and the lively bazaars make Udaipur one of India's greatest destinations.



City Palace, Udaipur © Shutterstock

Participants may choose from one of two excursion options, a city tour of Udaipur or birding at two lakes outside Udaipur in the vicinity of the village of Menar.

Option 1: Udaipur city tour

We will depart the train at 10:00 a.m. and commence our exploration of Udaipur. On this varied sightseeing tour, we'll take in a number of important sites in the city including the City Palace, Crystal Gallery, and Jagdish Temple. The majestic white City Palace, located in the heart of the city, is the largest palace complex in Rajasthan. A prime attraction, the palace was originally built by Maharana Udai Singh of the Sisodia Rajput clan and expanded to its present form by subsequent Maharanas ("king of kings" in Hindi). Built in granite and marble and surrounded by crenellated fort walls, the complex stands on a crest overlooking Lake Pichola. Almost all the rooms of the palace have beautiful paintings, inlay glass work, antique furniture and colorful enamel. The Krishna Vilas hosts a remarkable collection of miniature paintings depicting royal processions, festivals and games of the Maharanis (wives of the Maharajas), and the Mor Chowk (Patio of the Peacocks) features unique glass mosaics of peacocks set in the walls, showing the three seasons: summer, winter and monsoon. The exterior of the complex is marked by an array of eye-catching features including scalloped arches, balconies, and cupolas. The extravagant Crystal Gallery holds a remarkable collection of crystal, including crystal chairs, sofas, tables, and beds. The Jagdish Temple is a Hindu Temple that is one of the most widely admired landmarks in Udaipur, featuring a brilliantly sculpted exterior. Other activity highlights include a short morning boat ride on Lake Pichola and a sumptuous lunch at Satkar Hall of elegant Fateh Prakash Palace. We will return to the train in the mid-afternoon.

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 big variety of wetland birds. Nearby, bushy thickets also attract wintering passerines and resident desert birds. We will depart the train at 10:00 a.m. in advance of spending the better part of the day here, birding around the lakes trying to see as many birds as possible. Among the many species here are Bar-headed and Graylag geese, Comb Duck, Gray Francolin, Great and Little cormorants, Great White and Dalmatian pelicans, Red-naped Ibis, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, White-eyed Buzzard, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, Eurasian Thick-knee, Yellow-wattled and White-tailed lapwings, Temminck's Stint, Green and Wood sandpipers, Greater Coucal, Asian Koel, Spotted Owlet, Eurasian Hoopoe, Indian Roller, Southern Gray Shrike, Common and Jungle babblers, Indian Robin, Rosy and Brahminy starlings, Bank Myna, and Purple Sunbird. We will bring packed lunches with us from the train so as not to be hard pressed for time. We will return to the train in the late afternoon.

NIGHT: Aboard Maharajas' Express



Bank Mynas © Machiel Valkenburg

February 16, Day 7: A day at Jodhpur: a.m. birding at Guda Talab; p.m. city tour; travel to Bikaner. After breakfast the train arrives in Jodhpur in advance of a day of birding and sightseeing.

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. Beginning in 1549, when the city was called Jodhagarh, the Rathor clan of Rajputs fought and ruled from the virtually impregnable fort until their territory covered some 35,000 square miles, making it the largest Rajput state. Today Jodhpur, with its one million-plus inhabitants, is the second largest city of Rajasthan. It still fulfills its historical role as the area's main trading center for wood, cattle, camels, cotton, salt, hides and agricultural crops. Populated by a proud people, Jodhpur is characterized by men with their lovingly tended up-curved moustaches. 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, approximately twelve miles outside of Jodhpur, where we will spend a couple of hours birding at Guda Talab. The population of this area is predominantly Bishnoi, a religious sect founded roughly five-hundred years ago in the Indian medieval era. The Bishnoi community is based on twenty-nine tenets, laid down by Jambhoji Maharaj—the Jhambheshwar Maharaj. One of these tenets is protection of wildlife, which includes not cutting down trees. Consequently, the Bishnoi community has played a significant role in protection of the local ecology. Guda Talab is a small wetland complex that offers food and shelter to a wide variety of resident and migrant birds alike. Of the many species possible are prizes such as Ruddy Shelduck, Greater Flamingo, Painted Stork, Indian Cormorant, Oriental Darter, Black-headed Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, and Black-tailed Godwit among many others.

In recent years, this site has been reliable for the beautiful Demoiselle Crane, and so we hope it will be for us on this day. Nearby shrublands and sandflats might hold Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Greater Short-toed Lark, Crested Lark, Indian Chat (Brown Rock-Chat), and Long-billed and Tawny pipits. With luck we may encounter rarities like Red-headed Vulture or Laggar Falcon. We will also have a chance to see Blackbuck and Chinkara (Indian Gazelle), two beautiful species of antelope.



Demoiselle Crane, Guda Bishnoiyan © Machiel Valkenburg

In the afternoon we will join a walking tour of Jodhpur. We'll start with a visit to Sardar Market, situated in close proximity to the Old Clock Tower, which is one of the major landmarks of Jodhpur. The clock tower was built by Maharaja Sardar Singh, for whom the market is named. Sardar Market is noted for its general merchandise and bandhani materials (variously decorated tie-dye textiles). The market is arranged around a main street with narrow lanes leading away in different directions. The sides of each lane are lined with many shops big and small that sell sweets, textiles, and an array of handicrafts.

We'll continue to the imposing Mehrangarh Fort, which dominates the city. Started in 1459, this massive structure is the quintessence of Rajput culture and history. Still run by the Maharaja of Jodhpur, this majestic fort sprawls across a hill 400-feet high and is one of Rajasthan's most formidable fortifications. Inside, a series of courtyards and palaces and a museum hold a splendid collection of the trappings of Indian royalty including miniature paintings and weaponry. As we walk through the huge Loha (Iron) Gate into the fort, we can see the many hand

prints left by the queens and concubines of the maharajas of Jodhpur before they committed sati (self-immolation) by throwing themselves onto the funeral pyres of their husbands. The hand prints are still daubed with red as a mark of respect, for those who committed sati are held in great reverence by the people of Rajasthan.



Mehrangarh Fort, Jodhpur © Shutterstock

As well as possessing remarkably rich decoration and numerous fascinating objects from the great days of the maharajas, the fort offers dramatic panoramic views across the “Blue City” of Jodhpur (so-called because of the many blue-painted buildings). At the southern end of the fort old cannons look out from the ramparts that tower over the old town below.

A few meters below the fort sits the site of the attractive white marble royal cenotaph of Jaswant Singh II and four of his successors. With luck, we may see Indian (Long-billed) and Egyptian vultures which sometimes nest on the steep cliffs below the fort and can be seen soaring over the city.

Dinner will be at an exclusive venue where we'll enjoy fabulous Indian cuisine. Afterward, we will return to the train and depart for Bikaner.

NIGHT: Aboard Maharajas' Express

February 17, Day 8: Bikaner: a.m. at Junagarh Fort; p.m. at Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary; travel to Jaipur.

The trip from Jodhpur will conclude upon our arrival in Bikaner, around 10:00 this morning. Here, 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 to Gajner for birding and wildlife viewing at Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary before ending the day with dinner amid the sand dunes of the Thar Desert.

Located in the northwest of Rajasthan state, the city of Bikaner is the former capital of the princely state of the same name. Founded by Rao Bika in the late fourteen-hundreds, Bikaner began as an outpost in the wilderness region known then as Jangladesh. A fort and settlement were established that grew up as an oasis on the trade route between Central Asia and Gujarat on the coast. After about one hundred years, a new fortification, Junagarh Fort, was built a short distance away and subsequently served as the center around which the future city would grow.

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In the early sixteen-hundreds, Bikaner reached new heights under suzerainty of the Mughal Empire, for which the raja and his army successfully fought. In the early decades of the nineteenth century Bikaner came under British rule. Today it is the fourth largest city in Rajasthan state.

The modern city of Bikaner is built around Junagarh Fort, a massive quadrangle complex featuring numerous palaces, temples, and gates. The fort served as the home of the Maharajas of Bikaner for hundreds of years until the early twentieth century when the royal family relocated to Lalgarh Palace. Today, the fort and its temples and palaces are preserved as museums and provide insight into the grandiose living style of the past Maharajas of Rajasthan. The fort complex was built under the supervision of Karan Chand, who ruled Bikaner from 1571–1611 and was designed with walls more than fourteen feet thick and gates reinforced to withstand battering by elephants. In the tradition of the Maharajas, succeeding rulers built their own palaces rather than inhabit the ones used by their forebears, thus the massive Junagarh Fort offers a study in Rajput architectural and artistic prowess that spans the centuries. We will have a couple of hours to tour the site and to try and absorb the opulence around us including some of the many sculptures, carvings, and priceless works of art that adorn the various chambers, rooms, and galleries.

After lunch on board the train, we'll head west into the Thar Desert for birding and wildlife viewing at Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary. Located about 20 miles outside of Bikaner, Gajner Wildlife Sanctuary is a natural haven on the shores of a lake,



Blackbuck © Shutterstock

near stately Gajner Palace. Long before it served as a wildlife sanctuary, the property was used as a hunting ground by the Maharaja of Bikaner. Consequently, an impressive variety of animals are found here including Blackbuck, Chinkara (Indian Gazelle), and Nilgai. The sanctuary has also been selected as a site for the Cheetah reintroduction project in India. On the birding front the sanctuary hosts a compelling mix of waterbirds and landbirds including a number of species possible but not previously mentioned to this point, such as Common Pochard, Ferruginous and Tufted ducks, Common Crane, Cinereous Vulture, Long-legged Buzzard, Indian Pond-Heron, White-breasted Waterhen, Red-wattled Lapwing, and with luck, rarities like Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Asian Desert Warbler.

In the late afternoon we will repair to Gajner Palace for a tea and coffee break. We'll then transfer a short distance to the nearby sand dunes of the Thar Desert for a cultural activity and dinner. Our transfer from the palace will present a unique opportunity to ride atop a camel, or, if preferred, to ride in a camel-drawn cart.

NIGHT: Aboard Maharajas' Express

February 18, Day 9: Jaipur—p.m. visit to Amer Fort or Nahargarh Biological Park; travel to Sawai Madhopur. After a leisurely start to the morning, 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 (Amber Fort) or birding and wildlife viewing at Nahargarh National Park.

The city of Jaipur was founded in 1727 by Jay Singh II, the Raja of Amer who ruled 1699–1743. The rationale for the new city was that the settlement at Amer had outgrown itself and was also suffering from a shortage of water. The new city grew quickly and prospered, over time developing healthy metal working and marble carving industries. 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 Rajasthan state and its largest city. It is home to two World Heritage Sites and other prime attractions such as palaces, forts, and temples.

Upon arrival, we will transfer to the beautiful City Palace of Jaipur where we will have lunch. The seat of the Maharaja of Jaipur, the palace complex was constructed 1729-1732 and contains a wealth of palaces, courtyards, gardens, and pavilions. Part of the complex still serves as the residence for the royal family of Rajasthan.

Following lunch participants may choose from one of two excursion options: a visit to Amer Fort or birding and wildlife viewing at Nahargarh National Park.

Option 1: Amer Fort (Amber Fort)

Situated on a ridge overlooking scenic Lake Maota, Amer Fort is the leading tourist attraction of Jaipur. Featuring an extravagant fort-palace surrounded by ramparts, the site offers a peek into the region’s Mughal past. Settlement at the site (first town of Amer) dates to the eleventh century A.D., but it was not until the sixteen-hundreds when, under the rule of Raja Man Singh I (1550-1614), that the first palaces of the



Amer (Amber) Fort © Shutterstock

fort, as it now stands, were built. Constructed of red sandstone and marble, the opulent palace complex is laid out on four levels, each with a courtyard. A short jeep-ride will take us up to the fort where we will enjoy a tour of the battlements, gates, and royal apartments. The Sheesh Mahal (Chamber of Mirrors) is not to be missed while the Jai Mandir (Hall of Victory) is so delicately ornamented with fine inlay work that it actually glows.

Option 2: Nahargarh Biological Park

Nahargarh Biological Park is located in the vicinity of Nahargarh Fort on the outskirts of Jaipur. The park is spread over 2.8 square miles and protects native dry-deciduous acacia woodland with pockets of monsoonal vine thicket. Also here are rocky outcrops of granite and quartzite. The birding can be quite good, and a representation of species possible includes Painted Francolin, Plum-headed Parakeet, Small Minivet, Bay-backed and Long-tailed shrikes, White-browed Fantail, Rufous Treepie, Red-vented Bulbul, Common Tailorbird, Brahminy Starling, Chestnut-breasted Bunting (also known as White-capped Bunting), and Chestnut-shouldered Petronia.

NIGHT: Aboard Maharajas' Express

February 19–20, Days 10–11: Sawai Madhopur; deboard Maharajas' Express; Ranthambore National Park. Our magnificent train journey comes to an end this morning with our arrival in Sawai Madhopur, an administrative district of Rajasthan state and gateway to Ranthambore National Park. Our activities will be determined in part by several variables including our actual arrival time in Sawai Madhopur, the deboard time from the train, and when our hotel will be available for check-in.

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Depending on our schedule, we might be able to start the day with a trip to nearby Ranthambore National Park, which lies only about four and a half miles from the train station. At some point thereafter we'll head to our beautiful hotel: the Oberoi Vanyavilas, where we hope to check in early.

Following lunch, we will return to the national park for an afternoon game ride by "canter." In India, a canter is a popular and efficient way to visit off-road environments. They are essentially a large, open-backed truck with seats in the back.

Situated in southeast Rajasthan state, Ranthambore is one of the largest national parks in northern India and certainly one of the most important locations in the country's network of Tiger reserves. Encompassing 150 plus square miles of rocky hill and plateau country covered in dry deciduous jungle on the periphery of the Vindhya Range, the park protects a large stretch of land that once served as the private hunting ground of the Maharajas of Jaipur. Ranthambore sits amid a magnificent setting. An eleventh-century fortress dominates the headquarters area and a pretty lake nearby commands much of our attention. Although most famous as one of India's foremost Tiger sanctuaries, it is equally exciting for its birdlife.



Rufous Treepie © Machiel Valkenburg

We will have at least an afternoon and a full day in this beautiful park. Regardless of our morning schedule, our activities will commence in the earnest on the afternoon of February 19 following lunch. Our excursions will take us to different parts of the park where we will explore a number of habitats aboard canters. Among the more interesting birds we may encounter here 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, Shikra, the handsome Painted Sandgrouse, Yellow-footed Green-Pigeon, Greater Coucal, Brown Fish-Owl, White-naped Woodpecker, White-bellied Drongo, White-browed Fantail, Rufous Treepie, Dusky Crag-Martin, Common and White-tailed ioras (the latter a localized endemic), Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher, Jungle and Plain prinias, Chestnut-breasted Bunting (aka White-capped Bunting), and Indian Silverbill.

Ranthambore is an excellent place to see mammals as well, where some of the more common animals are primates (Northern Plains Gray Langur), antelope (Sambar and Nilgai), deer (Spotted Deer, or Chital), and Wild Hog. Of course, tops on the list are the cats, and our visit gives a very realistic chance of seeing a Bengal Tiger or a Leopard. We have a reasonable chance of seeing a Tiger.

NIGHTS: The Oberoi Vanyavilas, Ranthambore



Bengal Tiger, Ranthambore © Machiel Valkenburg

February 21–22, Days 12–13: Transfer to Bharatpur; Keoladeo National Park. After breakfast this morning we'll continue the adventure in a northeast trajectory as we make our way toward the city of Bharatpur, still in the state of Rajasthan. The transfer will take about five hours, and with it will come more exposure to the Indian countryside. We will not stop more than a time or two as we plan to be in Bharatpur in time for a late lunch.

Following check-in to the hotel, we will spend the remainder of the afternoon at nearby Keoladeo National Park. Because this area is so rich, we will spend all of the following day at this amazing place as well.

Better known as Bharatpur after the town in which it is located, Keoladeo National Park is one of the last major undisturbed jheels (a wetland in India) remaining in north-central India and is widely considered one of the greatest birding spots in the entire country. As such, it is of critical importance to huge numbers of Palearctic waterbirds and birds of prey that winter in the sub-continent. In addition, it supports important nesting colonies of species such as Painted Stork and Asian Openbill. Although unlikely to be breeding at the time of our visit, these storks are resident throughout most of the year, feeding on the rich pickings provided by the reserve's protected water supply.

In addition to its wonderful wetland community, Bharatpur also encompasses areas of tall woodland and low, semi-arid scrub that supports a fascinating assemblage of woodland and semi-desert birds. February is a particularly good time of the year to be here as large numbers of wintering birds are present in addition to the resident species.

We will explore the multitude of habitats that characterize this fabulously rich but surprisingly compact reserve. Bird species we may see include Lesser Whistling-Duck; Graylag and Bar-headed geese; Comb Duck; Cotton Pygmy-Goose; Red-crested and Common pochards; Ferruginous Duck; Asian Openbill; Painted and Black-necked storks (the latter a spectacular but dwindling species); Little, Great, and Indian cormorants; Cinnamon and Black bitterns; Purple Heron; Black-headed and Red-naped ibis; Eurasian Spoonbill; Sarus Crane; and Shikra. The number of overwintering birds of prey present in the sanctuary is often remarkable. In one day here it is possible to see Steppe, Tawny, Imperial, Greater Spotted and Indian Spotted eagles; Short-Toed Snake-eagle; Pallid and Montagu's harriers, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier; Eurasian Kestrel; and Peregrine Falcon.

Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express, Page 15

Other species we may see include White-breasted Waterhen, Brown Crake, a variety of vultures (most of which have become quite rare) Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Greater Painted-Snipe, Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-winged jacanas, and White-throated and Pied kingfishers.



Sarus Cranes © Machiel Valkenburg

In the surrounding woodlands we will look for specialties such as Indian Scops-Owl, Dusky Eagle-Owl, Brown-capped and Yellow-crowned woodpeckers, Common Woodshrike, White-tailed Iora, Small and Scarlet minivets, Verditer Flycatcher, Oriental White-eye, Common Tailorbird, and Orange-headed Thrush.

In the drier areas we may find Indian Courser, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Pallid Harrier, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Spotted Owlet, Isabelline Shrike, Rufous-tailed Lark, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Bengal (Rufous-winged) Bushlark, White-eared Bulbul, Variable and Desert wheatears, and Richard's and Long-billed pipits. Among the Palearctic passerine migrants, we may encounter Blyth's Reed-Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Bluethroat, Siberian Rubythroat, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Olive-backed Pipit, and a number of challenging *Phylloscopus* leaf-warblers, often known in birding parlance as "little brown jobs."

NOTE: Bird abundance will depend on water level conditions. All of the above is possible assuming that water conditions are normal.

NIGHTS: The Bagh Resort, Bharatpur

February 23, Day 14: Transfer to Agra; visit to Agra Fort; sunset visit to Taj Mahal. After breakfast this morning we will load up and commence the trip to Agra, a city on the Yamuna River in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Although birding is an ever-present aspect of our experiences, today will be one of cultural wonders.

The drive to Agra will take approximately two hours, at which time we will spend the duration of the morning touring Agra Fort.

This majestic citadel of red sandstone dominates a major bend in the Yamuna River and was built by Emperor Akbar, 1565–1571. The fort is crescent shaped, flattened on the east with a long, nearly straight wall facing the river. Its colossal double walls rise sixty-nine feet in height and measure more than 1.5 miles in circumference. It is encircled by a moat, and the maze of courtyards, mosques and private chambers—all constructed of white marble—echo the glory of the great Mughal Empire and form a city within a city. Additions to the fort were made up until the time of Shah Jahan, while in Akbar's time, the fort was principally a military structure. By Shah Jahan's time, a part of the fort had been converted to a palace.



Agra Fort Palace

Following our tour of the fort, we'll head to the hotel for check-in and lunch.

After a break, and during the relative cool of the late afternoon, we will make our first pilgrimage to the legendary Taj Mahal. Built between 1630–1652 by the Emperor Shah Jahan, the Taj Mahal was erected in memory of the Shah's beloved consort, Mumtaz Mahal. Clad in white marble, this beautiful mausoleum is universally recognized as among the greatest of the world's architectural wonders. It is a special place, the product of nearly 20,000 laborers and artisans. We will enjoy the Taj Mahal all the way until after sundown before returning to the hotel. In our time here we will also keep an eye out for birds. The gardens surrounding the Taj and the Yamuna River, which flows below its ramparts, support a number of interesting birds including River Lapwing, occasionally Pallas's (Great Black-headed) and Brown-headed gulls, River Tern, Indian Gray Hornbill, Coppersmith Barbet, Red-rumped and Streak-throated swallows, and the comical Plain Prinia.

NIGHT: The Oberoi Amar Vilas, Agra

February 24, Day 15: Early morning at 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 load up and complete our grand journey with a transfer to Delhi, a ride that will consume approximately four hours. We will arrive in Delhi toward the middle of the afternoon in time for hotel check-in. We will have the rest of the afternoon and evening at leisure.

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NOTE: We will have two nights in Delhi, with a full day of activities planned for February 25 followed by late night transfer to the airport for departing flights home. Although our time in the city is limited, Delhi frequently suffers from poor air quality, and anyone who wishes to skip the next day's activities may depart Delhi tonight. Those who depart the tour early will receive a reduction in the tour fee for skipping the next day's activities. Please refer to the FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS section of this itinerary for more information.

NIGHT: The Oberoi, Delhi

February 25, Day 16: Morning visit to Okhla Bird Sanctuary; afternoon city tour; depart for home. Today, our final day in India, will consist of a morning-long birding excursion followed by a grand finale city tour of Delhi.

This morning we will visit Okhla Bird Sanctuary, one of India's Important Bird Areas (IBA), situated at a point where the Yamuna River enters the state of Uttar Pradesh. This wetland was formed due to the creation of the Okhla Barrage (weir) in 1874. Despite its small size (1.5 square miles), the sanctuary contains an array of habitats including thorny scrub, grasslands, reed beds, and marshy banks—all of which contribute to a sizeable bird list. Among the large number of waterbirds that will be present, we may find Common Pochard, Eurasian Wigeon, Garganey, Painted Stork, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, a large diversity of shorebirds, Small Pratincole, Brown-headed Gull, Yellow-footed Green-Pigeon, Alexandrine Parakeet, Indian Gray Hornbill, Striated Babbler, Bluethroat, White-tailed Stonechat, a nice selection of warblers, weavers, and more.

After lunch at a restaurant in the city, we'll spend the afternoon on a guided interpretive tour of Delhi.

Delhi, India's capital city, is a city of wide boulevards, formal parks, and elegant landscaping. Traveling with a local guide, we'll see the magnificent Parliament Building and the Rashtrapati Bhavan (the latter once the awe-inspiring residence of the British viceroys and now the presidential palace), designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and occupying 330 acres of land; India Gate (a majestic 138-foot high arch built as a memorial to the Indian soldiers killed in World War I; Qutab Minar (a 238-foot high tower dating to the thirteenth century); and Humanyun's Tomb (built in the sixteenth century and architecturally the forerunner of the Taj Mahal).

We will gather for a farewell dinner this evening. There will be much to talk about of this fantastic journey through India.

NOTE: Flights to the USA depart India very late at night. Departing participants will be transferred to the airport sometime this evening in order to check in for international flights.

NIGHT: The Oberoi, Delhi

February 26, Day 17: Early morning departure for home. Flights departing India early this morning arrive in the USA today.

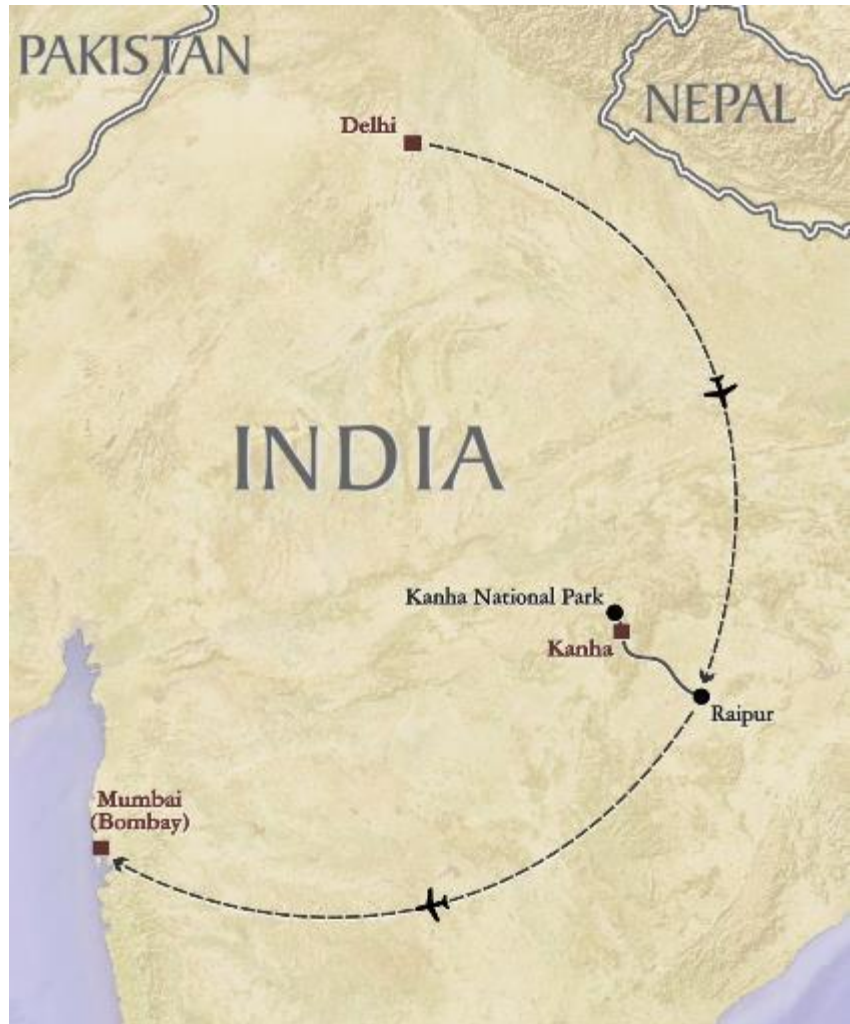
KANHA NATIONAL PARK PRE-TRIP FEBRUARY 5-11, 2021

On this optional pre-trip to the Maharajas' Express India train journey, we'll travel from Delhi into the heartland of the great Indian subcontinent. We will visit one of the largest Tiger reserves in India, Kanha National Park, where we have a good chance to see a wild Tiger in addition to a marvelous diversity of other mammals and birds.

*Kanha National Park is one of the country's most revered protected areas. It is also part of Project Tiger, one of India's most important conservation efforts. Here, amid the setting for Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, we will travel by jeep through many different habitats seeking an excellent variety of wildlife. Through forest, grassland, river, and stream, some of the species we may encounter include the endangered Hard-ground Barasingha, Barking Deer, Spotted Deer (Chital), Gaur—the largest of all wild cattle—Golden Jackal, Leopard, Jungle Cat, Northern Plains Gray Langur, Sloth Bear, Wild Boar, Dhole (Asian Wild Dog), and, of course, Tiger.*

This lovely park also teems with an assortment of great birds. Some of the specialties we may observe are Red Junglefowl, Painted Francolin, Woolly-necked Stork, Lesser Adjutant, Crested Serpent-Eagle, Bronze-winged Jacana, Greater Coucal, Brown Fish-Owl, Indian Gray Hornbill, White-throated Kingfisher, Green Bee-eater, Indian Roller, Lesser Yellownappe, Scarlet Minivet, Black-hooded Oriole, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Rufous Treepie, and Indian Scimitar-Babbler.

Our lodge for the duration of our stay is a beautiful rural forest retreat offering excellent accommodations, very good garden birding and superb food in close proximity to the national park and its wildlife.



February 5–6, Days 1–2: Travel to Delhi, India. Most flights from North America departing on February 1 will connect to flights arriving Delhi, India (Indira Gandhi International airport; airport code DEL) in the evening hours of February 2*. Upon arrival in Delhi (February 2), you will be met by a representative of our ground agent and transferred to our beautiful hotel where a room has been reserved in your name.

*We suggest arriving Delhi a day early to allow for potential flight delays and to get rested following the long international flight. VENT will be happy to assist with additional lodging arrangements and transfers should you choose to arrive prior to February 2.

NIGHTS: Aboard aircraft in transit to Delhi (February 5)
Radisson Blu Plaza Hotel, Delhi (February 6)

February 7, Day 3: Fly to Raipur; transfer to Kanha. Early this morning we will return to the airport for the morning flight south to Raipur, capital of the state of Chattisgarh, located amid the great forests of Central India. Upon arrival we will be met by our ground agent and transferred directly to our hotel at Kanha.

The relatively long drive to Kanha will consume much of the rest of the day and will take us on a wonderful journey across India, with its bird-rich farmlands and villages that barely appear to acknowledge the passage of time. We will arrive at the lodge in the mid-to-late afternoon. Time permitting, we may convene for an optional birding outing on the lodge grounds.

NOTE: Morning flights out of Delhi are frequently delayed due to heavy fog, in which case we will take a later flight.

NIGHT: The Baagh Resort, Kanha

February 8–10, Days 4–6: Kanha National Park. Kanha Tiger Reserve, also known as Kanha National Park, is one of the largest national parks in Central India, covering a remarkable 750 square miles, inclusive of a 363 square mile “core zone.” It is also part of Project Tiger, one of India’s most important conservation efforts.

We will spend three full days exploring the park for wildlife, traveling by jeep through different habitats that include Sal forest (“tropical moist deciduous forest”), bamboo thicket, *dadar* (plateau grasslands), and valley bottom grasslands. The vastness of the area and the variety of these habitats has resulted in a glorious mosaic of wildlife, a haven for a superb variety of mammals and birds.

Few places outside of Africa offer the quality of mammal viewing as does India. Some of the species we may encounter include the globally endangered Hard-ground Barasingha (this being the only place where this subspecies of Swamp Deer persists), Barking Deer, Spotted Deer (Chital), Gaur—the largest of all wild cattle, Golden Jackal, Leopard, Jungle Cat, Northern Plains Gray Langur, Sloth Bear, Wild Boar, Dhole (Asian Wild Dog), and Bengal Tiger.

Our chance of seeing a tiger is difficult to predict. Tigers have been seen on many past VENT tours to Kanha, but not all. Throughout our stay we will be in communication with local guides and park rangers for news on recent sightings.

The park is home to many central Indian bird species, a representation of which includes Indian Peafowl, Red Junglefowl, Woolly-necked Stork, Oriental Darter, Indian Pond-Heron, Red-naped Ibis, Red-headed Vulture, Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Crested Serpent-Eagle, White-eyed Buzzard, Bronze-winged Jacana, Yellow-footed Green-Pigeon, Greater



Jungle Owlet © Machiel Valkenburg

Coucal, Sirkeer Malkoha, Indian Scops-Owl, Jungle Owlet, Indian and Savannah nightjars, Crested Treeswift, Indian Gray Hornbill, Blue-bearded and Green bee-eaters, Indian Roller, Brown-throated Barbet, Lesser Yellow-nape, Black-rumped Flameback, Rufous and White-naped woodpeckers, Alexandrine and Plum-headed parakeets, Scarlet Minivet, Black-hooded Oriole, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, Rufous Treepie, Yellow-eyed Babbler, Tawny-bellied Babbler, Indian Scimitar-Babbler, White-rumped Shama, Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher, Verditer Flycatcher, Olive-backed Pipit, Crested Bunting, and Red Avadavat.

NIGHT: The Baagh Resort, Kanha



Tiger © Machiel Valkenburg

February 11, Day 7: Transfer to Raipur; fly to Mumbai. After breakfast this morning we will bid farewell to noble Kanha and make the return journey to Raipur, perhaps with a stop or two en route. We'll take the late afternoon flight bound for Mumbai, arriving around 7:00 p.m. Upon arrival we will be met by our ground agent and transferred to our hotel where a room has been reserved in your name.

KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK EXTENSION

FEBRUARY 26–MARCH 3, 2021

On this optional extension to the Maharajas' Express India train journey, we'll travel to wonderful Kaziranga National Park in India's northeastern state of Assam. Widely regarded among the most important nature reserves in Asia, Kaziranga provides a rare window onto how wild Asia must once have appeared. Fantastic birding and world-class mammal viewing are a certainty, while opportunities for photography are equally outstanding.



Located on the south bank of the mighty Brahmaputra River, Kaziranga's mosaic of marshes, vast reed-beds, riverine woodlands, and lowland sub-tropical forests literally teem with birds and mammals. Over the course of three days we'll explore this magnificent park by jeep and, on occasion, from the backs of elephants. The birding here is superb, but the presence of such a vast and impressive suite of mega-fauna guarantees an extraordinary all-around natural history experience. We may record close to two hundred species of birds and we have good chances to encounter a large number of spectacular mammals including Indian Rhinoceros (Greater One-horned Rhinoceros), Asian Elephant and Hoolock Gibbon—one of the great apes—in addition to a range of other remarkable mammals and reptiles such as Gaur (Indian Bison), Barasingha (Swamp Deer), Sloth Bear, Hog Badger, Leopard and Jungle cats, pythons, and monitor lizards. Even Bengal Tiger is possible.

Kaziranga National Park is a birding paradise home to hundreds of resident birds and winter visitors alike, some of which range from highly threatened to severely endangered. A representation of avian possibilities includes Bar-headed Goose, Falcated Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Swamp Francolin, Black-necked Stork, Greater Adjutant, Spot-billed Pelican, Cinnamon Bittern, Oriental Honey-Buzzard, Himalayan Griffon, Brahminy Kite, Pallas's and Gray-headed fish-eagles, Bengal Florican, Great Hornbill, Red-headed Trogon, and so much more!

February 26, Day 1: Fly to Guwahati; transfer to Kaziranga. Early this morning we will fly across the breadth of northern India to the capital of Assam, Guwahati. Upon arrival we will be met by our local agents and commence the drive to Kaziranga National Park. For the entire length of our journey we will follow the course of the mighty Brahmaputra River. Here, the rich alluvial deposits left by the river's frequent summer floods have created emerald-

green farmland—which, with its well-kept rice fields plowed by Water Buffalo, is more reminiscent of tropical Southeast Asia. At this time of the year, the temperature will be pleasantly warm to occasionally cool. We will take the entire afternoon to reach the park, perhaps with a stop or two along the way to look for birds and mammals. Some of the species we may see en route include the globally endangered Greater Adjutant, Asian Openbill, Pied Harrier, Asian Palm-Swift, Pied and White-throated kingfishers, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Red-breasted Parakeet, Large Cuckooshrike; Red-whiskered Bulbul; Chestnut-tailed Starling; and Indian Silverbill.

As we enter the park, we should be especially watchful for mammals, including Indian Rhinoceros and Asian Elephant.

NIGHT: Infinity Resort, Kaziranga

February 27–March 1, Days 2–4: Kaziranga National Park. Kaziranga is without doubt one of the truly great wildlife sanctuaries of South Asia. Encompassing an area of approximately 300 square miles, it boasts a wonderful array of habitats. They range from the vast, head-high grasslands interspersed with lagoons and marshes that border the Brahmaputra, to monsoon woodlands alive with flowering *Erythrina* trees, to the rich lowland, subtropical forest at the foot of the Panbari Hills. Consequently, Kaziranga supports a profusion of wildlife.

We will have three full days to explore and enjoy this magnificent park. The birding will be outstanding, but a visit to Kaziranga is about more than simply birding; it is a full natural history experience that offers strong insight into the amazing wilderness that existed throughout the subcontinent so long ago. Kaziranga is home to many species of birds as well as a number of uncommon and globally threatened mammals such as Indian Rhinoceros (Great One-horned Rhinoceros)—impressively common in Kaziranga, its global stronghold; Tiger; Fishing Cat; Capped Langur; Hoolock Gibbon; Swamp and Hog deer; Gaur; and Asian Elephant.

A representation of the many species of birds possible includes the handsome Bar-headed Goose and a fine variety of other waterfowl; Swamp Francolin; Kalij Pheasant; Black-necked Stork and Greater and Lesser adjutant storks (all three species regarded as globally threatened); Bengal Florican; several species of migrant eagles including Greater Spotted, Tawny, and perhaps Steppe eagles; Pallas's Fish-Eagle; Gray Peacock-Pheasant (very noisy but tough to see); Bronze-winged Jacana; Gray-headed Lapwing; Orange-breasted and Thick-billed pigeons; Green Imperial-Pigeon; Green-billed Malkoha; Asian Barred Owlet; Brown Boobook; Large-tailed Nightjar; Stork-billed Kingfisher;



Asian Elephant © Machiel Valkenburg

Wreathed and Great hornbills (the latter the largest of all arboreal hornbills—a magnificent bird); Red-headed Trogon; Blue-bearded Bee-eater; Blue-throated Barbet; Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker; Red-necked Falcon; Blossom-headed and Red-breasted parakeets; Scarlet Minivet; Maroon Oriole; the exquisite Asian Fairy-bluebird; Greater Racket-tailed Drongo; Greater-necklaced and Lesser-necklaced laughingthrushes; the scarce Slender-billed and Jerdon's babblers; White-crowned and Black-backed forktails; Black-faced Bunting, the rare Finn's Weaver, and a great many others.

NIGHT: Infinity Resort, Kaziranga

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March 2, Day 5: Transfer to Guwahati; fly to Delhi; transfer to hotel; depart for home. It will be hard to tear ourselves away from such a paradisiacal setting; however, go we must. Early this morning we will return to Guwahati, arriving in time to connect with our return flight to Delhi. We will arrive in Delhi around 7:00 p.m. tonight, followed by transfer to our hotel where we have reserved rooms for the evening.

NOTE: Flights to the USA depart India very late at night. Departing participants will be transferred to the airport sometime later this evening in order to check in for international flights.

NIGHT: Radisson Blu Plaza Deli Airport, Delhi

March 3, Day 6: Early morning departure for home. Flights departing India early this morning arrive in the USA today.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least four months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and arrange transfers often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

TOUR SIZE: The India: Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express will be limited to 40 participants; and the Kanha National Park Pre-trip as well as the Kaziranga National Park Extension will be limited to 15 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: The India: Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express will be led by **Dion Hobcroft, Machiel Valkenburg, Raj Singh, Max Breckenridge, Brian Gibbons** and an array of local leaders. The Kanha Pre-trip will be led by **Machiel Valkenburg, Max Breckenridge**, and a local leader. The Kaziranga Extension will be led by **Machiel Valkenburg** and a local leader.



Dion Hobcroft has been working for VENT since 2001. He has led many tours (more than 160) to Australia, New Guinea, New Zealand, Bhutan, Indonesia, India, China, Southwest Pacific, Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Japan, Russia, Alaska, Tanzania, Uganda, Madagascar, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the Antarctic. In 2007 and 2013–2017 alone, Dion showed more than 2,000 species of birds to VENT clients. His informative, relaxed, and educational nature, combined with sharp eyes and ears, has established Dion as a favorite of many tour participants. His fieldwork for over 40 years on birds and other terrestrial vertebrates has allowed him to amass an extraordinary knowledge of the biodiversity in the Asia-Pacific region. Born in Tasmania and based in Sydney, Dion has traveled widely throughout Australasia, listing over 1,200 species, placing him in the top echelons of the region's birders. He is very tuned-in to the songs of bird species in the Asia-Pacific region and specializes in rare and elusive species. He is delighted to show these skulking rarities to his travel companions. Dion has published several papers on field ornithology, served on national and state rare bird committees, managed *Birdline NSW*, run introduction to ornithology courses for Sydney University, and, before he traveled so continuously, was a popular speaker with various natural history societies. Dion has worked for many research and government agencies ranging from the Antarctic Division, Department of Environment NSW, Agriculture Protection WA, Taronga Zoo, Australian Museum, and the Queensland Department of Primary Industry. Dion lives in Sydney with his wife, Lise, and two children, Grace (age 16) and Daniel (age 12).



Machiel Valkenburg was born in 1982 in a southern province in the Netherlands where, encouraged by his parents, he began birding at an early age. During his teens he studied landscape ecology and began performing bird surveys with the Dutch Centre for Field Ornithology. During this period he started traveling outside of Holland, first to Greece, Hungary, Romania, Scotland, and Morocco. Later, his birding travels took him extensively outside of Europe into Western Africa and further east to Russia and Kazakhstan. The nature and birds of Central Asia fascinated him so much that he stayed, resulting in the founding of his own bird tour company, Rubythroat Birding Tours. He lived in Kazakhstan for over 10 years, but moved back to Europe several years ago with his wife, Bonny. They now reside in Valencia on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. From Central Asia he ventured further, with Southeast Asia and India becoming favorite destinations. Machiel has developed an expertise in the natural history of Asia. Along with birds, a good part of his attention is also given to butterflies, dragonflies, and

mammals. Machiel speaks four languages, has good people and logistical skills, and is a natural-born bird guide. He loves to explore new destinations and show birds to his fellow birders. He has a keen eye and an excellent ear for bird sounds. Machiel is noted for his calm and respectful social approach, providing a good atmosphere during time in the field.



Max Breckenridge was born in the UK, but has lived virtually his entire life in Sydney, Australia. At age 12, his passion for birds was fostered when his parents took him and his brother out of school for 10 weeks to travel across Australia. After completing high school in Sydney, Max drove solo from Darwin to Broome, birding all the way, and spent the next month volunteering at the world-renowned Broome Bird Observatory. He is currently working on his Bachelor of Biodiversity & Conservation at Macquarie University. Max has birded across every state and almost every corner of the Australian landmass. He has an excellent eye, and especially ear, for Australian birds. Some of his birding exploits in Australia include two separate trips to the remote rainforests of Iron Range National Park on Queensland's Cape York (including a fly-in-fly-out trip during the middle of the wet season where he

spent two weeks under a tarp in order to see some of the key migrants from Papua New Guinea). Max has also birded the key sites of Sabah in Malaysia, some of Thailand, Cambodia, most of Vietnam, the length of India from Rajasthan to Kerala, Sri Lanka, and New Zealand, and is also familiar with the birds of Western Europe (the UK, France, Switzerland, and Germany). He is incredibly passionate about wildlife conservation. In addition to his focus of study, he has spent much of his spare time volunteering alongside PhD researcher Ross Crates studying the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater and conducting paid bird surveys. Max receives immense pleasure from birding and showing birds to others, and takes pride in writing detailed trip reports.



Raj Singh, born in Bharatpur, Rajasthan, is a distinguished ornithologist, fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, and inveterate world traveler. His first passion in life is wildlife conservation, and his knowledge of natural history is unsurpassed. He also has a fascination with India's history, culture, and cuisine. A descendant of India's royal Kshatriya family from Bharatpur, Raj is the author of *Bird and Wildlife Sanctuaries of India, Nepal and Bhutan*, and *Mammals of the Indian Subcontinent*.



Brian Gibbons grew up in suburban Dallas where he began exploring the wild world in local creeks and parks. Chasing butterflies and any animal that was unfortunate enough to cross paths with the Gibbons boys occupied his childhood. A wooden bird feeder kit sparked a flame that was stoked by a gift of the *Golden Guide* and family camping trips to Texas state parks. Thirty years ago Brian attended two VENT camps for young birders. Birds are now his primary interest, but all things wild continue to captivate him. After college, Brian undertook a variety of field biology research jobs that have taken him to the Caribbean, the Bering Sea, and the land of the midnight sun, arctic Alaska. He enjoys working with kids, hoping to spark environmental awareness through birds. For many years Brian's field research has involved bird banding. His most amazing recoveries were a female Wilson's Warbler that had been banded in Alaska and was captured by Brian in Colorado, and a Sooty Tern that perished after a hurricane on the Texas coast; it had plied the Gulf of Mexico and the oceans of the world for 24 years. Brian's recreational bird-seeking has taken him to Machu Picchu in Peru, the Great Wall in China, the plains of East Africa, and the Himalayas in Nepal. Brian leads birding trips in the United States, Central America, the Caribbean, South Africa, and Europe. As well as being a fanatical birder, he loves capturing birds with photography. He lives in Tucson, Arizona with his wife, Lacreia Johnson, and their son, Grayson.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the **India: Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express** is **\$17,995** per person in double occupancy from Mumbai (ends in Delhi). This includes all meals from Breakfast on Day 3 to Dinner on Day 16, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, Deluxe Cabins* while on the train, ground transportation during the tour, park entrance fees, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders and local guides. It does not include airfare from your home to Mumbai and return from Delhi, airport departure taxes, visa fees, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may be charged.

Those participants departing Delhi one day early, February 24, will receive a credit of **\$600** and will need to advise the office no less than 3 months prior to the departure date.

*Upgrades on the Maharajas' Express are available at the following additional per person price based on double occupancy:

- Deluxe Cabin to Junior Suites (seven cabins available): **\$3395.**
- Deluxe Cabin to the Suite (two cabins available): **\$6825.**

The fee for the **Kanha Pre-trip** is **\$3460** per person in double occupancy from Delhi (ends in Mumbai). This includes all meals from Breakfast on Day 3 to Dinner on Day 7, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, air fare in Economy class from Delhi to Raipur on Day 3 and Raipur to Mumbai on Day 7, park entrance fees, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leader and local guides. It does not include airfare from your home to Delhi and return from Mumbai, airport departure taxes, visa fees, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may be charged.

The fee for the **Kaziranga Extension** is **\$3670** per person in double occupancy from Delhi. This includes all meals from Breakfast on Day 1 to Dinner on Day 5, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, roundtrip air fare in Economy class between Delhi and Guwahati, park entrance fees, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leader and local guides. It does not include airfare from your home to Delhi and back, airport departure taxes, visa fees, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may be charged.

The single supplement for India: Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express is *\$7140; the single supplement for the Kanha Pre-trip is \$365; the single supplement for the Kaziranga Extension is \$280. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodation, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you. When pairing roommates, we will always pair participants of the same sex, and all shared accommodations are nonsmoking.

*For those willing to share a cabin on the train but wanting single accommodations for the “non-train nights”, the single supplement is \$2595.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

REGISTRATION: To register for these tours, please contact the VENT office. If you would like to pay your initial deposit(s) by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay the initial deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard, Visa or American Express at the time of registration. The VENT registration form (available through our office or our website: www.ventbird.com) should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

DEPOSITS:

- **Main tour:** The deposit for **India: Birds & Culture on the Maharajas' Express** is **\$1000** per person. A second deposit of \$3,000 is due 210 days prior to departure (July 15, 2020).
- **Pre-trip:** The deposit for **Kanha National park** is **\$1000** per person.
- **Extension:** The deposit for **Kaziranga National Park** is **\$1000** per person

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard, Visa, American Express), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (September 13, 2020) prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 210 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 209 and 151 days before departure date, the deposits are not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also apply to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For your protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

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If you cancel:

210 days or more before departure date
209 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

Your refund will be:

Your deposit(s) minus \$500*

No refund of the deposits, but any payments on the balance will be refunded

No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

Upon cancellation of the transportation or travel services, where you, the customer, are not at fault and have not cancelled in violation of the terms and conditions of any of the contract for transportation or travel services, all sums paid to VENT for services not received by you will be promptly refunded by VENT to you unless you otherwise advise VENT in writing.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Resolutions as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™**. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most highly regarded travel insurance programs available.

Critical benefits of **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance** include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services** from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; comprehensive travel insurance for **trip cancellation/interruption**, primary medical expense coverage, and much more. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available but must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, and a "Cancel for Any Reason" clause (must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit). Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: ripcordrescuetravelinsurance.com/ventbird; or click the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. ***Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.***

BAGGAGE: We recommend bringing one medium or large checked bag and one carry-on bag.

The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Baggage weight limits and fee amounts for checking bags may vary by airline and class of service. Please check with your air carrier for specific rules and regulations. As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack in your carry-on a change of clothes, essential toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential or valuable items. Excess baggage charges can be substantial and are the personal responsibility of the traveler.

Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check with your airline and the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: <http://www.tsa.gov/>.

For pre- and post-trip participants:

For domestic air travel in India, travelers are allowed one piece of checked luggage weighing up to 33 pounds (15 kilograms), one piece of carry-on luggage weighing up to 13 pounds (5.9 kilograms), and whatever you carry over your arm or in your hands (coat, book, purse, etc.). Excess baggage charges may well be enforced when these regulations are exceeded (bag weight and number). The differing regulations for international and domestic air travel can make planning complicated, yet we feel it is better to incur excess baggage charges than to cut back on clothing and equipment so that you are not prepared for a trip of this length. Excess baggage charges are the personal responsibility of the traveler.

CLOTHING: As this trip combines birding and nature excursions with interpretive walking tours and leisure time aboard the train, you will want to pack a mix of clothing that prepares you for all activities. In general, we recommend a "casual and comfortable" attire throughout the trip. The following items are recommended for the main tour as well as for the pre- and post-trip extensions:

- **Field Clothing:** Outdoor stores such as Cabela's and REI carry field clothing that many birders find appealing. Pants and shirts made of lightweight, yet durable materials with multiple pockets and ventilated seams are popular and more reasonably priced than in the past. Such clothing offers protection from the sun and biting insects and is easy to launder (including by hand). Notable brands include Columbia, Ex Officio, and REI. In particular, we recommend "Buzz-Off Outdoor Wear," which is field clothing pre-treated with Permethrin, designed to ward off biting insects.
- **Pants and shirts:** For non-birding occasions, such as cultural excursions or time on the train, you may also wish to have other types of clothing available. We recommend bringing a pair or two of lightweight pants made of cotton, denim, or other material. You might also consider several long-sleeved and short-sleeved shirts in addition to other comfortable styles suitable for warm weather.
- **Smart Casual:** The atmosphere aboard *Maharajas' Express* and in the finer hotels we'll use is casual, yet some will feel more comfortable with a few items of Smart Casual attire for some evenings. For women this includes casual dresses or blouse/slacks ensembles. For men this includes khakis/slacks and open-collared shirts. Sports jackets and ties are not necessary. Of course, the degree of dress is also in accordance with your personal preference.
- **Hat:** A hat for protection from the sun is essential. We recommend a flat-brimmed hat for the best protection, but you should at the least bring a baseball-style cap.
- **Sweaters and Coats:** February is a time marked by mild days and cool nights and mornings, with some mornings and nights being downright cold with temperatures dropping to the low 30s (°F). **It can be very cold in the early mornings on jeep safaris, particularly if there is wind.** A warm jacket or coat will be needed on some mornings in addition to other warm outerwear such as fleeces, sweaters, turtleneck shirts, etc. Participants should be prepared to dress in layers. A waterproof jacket will be needed in the event of rain.
- **Other cold weather gear:** It may be cold in the mornings and after sunset, so you will want to have handy other cold weather gear such as gloves, scarves, and headwear such as a knit or fleece cap or hat. Such items also offer fantastic cover from dust.
- **Socks:** Some people prefer thick socks for absorbing perspiration and cushioning one's feet, especially when walking constantly on a hard surface (such as occurs on cultural excursions).
- **Swimsuit:** You might want to pack a swimsuit if you like to swim, as all of the hotels we use have a swimming pool.

SPECIAL NOTES:

- India is a conservative part of the world, thus short pants, short skirts and halter-tops are not appropriate.
- For the pre- and post-trips, blankets are typically provided by the lodges for early morning drives.
- We strongly encourage you to avoid bringing clothing with bright colors, at least for when we are in the field. Although the birds and other wildlife are relatively approachable, we will be trying to see a number of elusive species. Muted colors enhance our chances for success. Also, please try to avoid nylon/plastic jackets and pants as their rustling makes it harder to hear the birds.

FOOTWEAR: A lightweight hiking boot or trail shoe is recommended for birding outings and when walking in cities, towns, historical sites, etc. You may also prefer sandals and/or athletic shoes for time on board the train. Athletic shoes are not appropriate as the sole form of footwear as they do not provide the same degree of stability or foot support of a sturdier shoe or boot. They also will not keep your feet dry if they get wet. Although certainly not necessary, some may feel more comfortable in “dressier” shoes in some of the hotels.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry service will be available on the train and at all of the hotels we visit. Note that laundry service is available at an extra charge.

EQUIPMENT: One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. The following items will come in handy during your trip:

- **Backpack or daypack:** Essential for carrying extra clothing, optical equipment, field guides, supplies, toiletries, food, and water during excursions
- **Notebooks and pens**
- **Travel alarm clock:** In addition, or in lieu of the alarm on your mobile phone.
- **Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection**
- **Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions:** Essential for sun protection
- **Personal toiletries:** Including medications, spare glasses and contact lenses, etc.
- **Cameras, lenses, memory cards, and extra batteries:** With added emphasis on memory cards. You will likely take many photographs and will need all the memory you can get.
- **Plastic bags:** A supply of strong plastic bags is very useful to protect equipment from rain and dust.
- **Collapsible walking stick:** A highly recommended item for those who have trouble walking
- **Tissue packs and handwipes:** Especially useful
- **Water bottle:** Important if you like to carry a regular supply of water.
- **Flashlight or headlamp:** Essential for being out after dark, particularly on the pre- and post-trip extensions.
- **Umbrella** - The small, collapsible type is easy to carry and useful against rain and sun.

BINOCULARS & SPOTTING SCOPES:

Binoculars – We strongly recommend good binoculars of at least 7x35, 8x42, 10x40, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend that you do NOT bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like them because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. Trying to find a bird in your binoculars using minis is like trying to read a book through a keyhole. You will be very frustrated, and even if you do manage to get the bird in your binoculars before it flies, you will have a poor view. You will find that 7x35 or 8x42 binoculars are compact and light enough.

Spotting Scopes – Your tour leaders will have spotting scopes available for group use throughout the trip, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

CLIMATE & WEATHER: Because of the broad geographical range of this tour, we anticipate conditions ranging from warm and dry to cold and damp. February is typically a drier time of the year in western and northern India, with significant rainfall not expected; however, this time of the year can produce remarkably cold and damp conditions, particularly in the early mornings and evenings. In February the days are typically marked by sunny skies and mild

temperatures ranging from the middle 50s–80s (°F). Farther south, around Mumbai, temperatures may reach the high 80s, while farther north morning and nighttime temperatures could fall to the low 30s. Please be prepared for the possibility of a cold snap with very cold mornings and high temperatures peaking in the low 50s.

On morning game drives, such as at Ranthambore (main tour) and Kanha and Kaziranga (pre- and post-trips), we'll be riding in the back of open jeeps, where it can be surprisingly cold, especially with wind chill. Fog is also a feature of the mornings, and dust is ever-present in some locations.

CONDITIONS:

Main tour program:

Your trip to India will be a relaxing but full travel experience in which birding and natural history activities are offered in tandem with visits to famous historical sites and cultural attractions, participating on guided tours, and experiencing one of the world's most beautiful trains. This trip offers an abundance of cultural, historical, and anthropological experiences in addition to being a birding trip, and participants should strongly consider this point before registering.

Because we intend for this program to appeal to anyone, we will provide options for different activities wherever possible. Participants whose main interest is the history and culture do not need to be birders to enjoy this trip or to participate in the birding portions of the itinerary. Similarly, birding options will be available as alternatives to the sightseeing options on most days throughout the trip.

The *Maharajas' Express* will serve as our base for five nights, a true hotel on wheels. Our days will be characterized by time aboard the train coupled with time off the train. Our time off the train includes visits to important birding areas and walking and driving tours of major historical sites and cultural attractions. Physical demands will be easy to moderate, but please bear in mind that our excursions may involve a variety of conditions including, but not limited to, walking and standing for extended periods; riding in a host of vehicles including tourist buses, canters (large trucks with open backs for seating), and jeeps. We emphasize that no one will be subjected to physical demands that exceed their capabilities. All walking will be done at a slow-to-moderate pace.

Prior to boarding the train, and after de-boarding on Day 10, we will stay at a host of resort-level hotels, most of which are in the highly regarded Oberoi line. These hotels were chosen to ensure that the level of quality matches that of the train.

The train

The *Maharajas' Express* is a four-time winner of the World's Leading Luxury Train Award. The train consists of fourteen guest carriages, each with several passenger suites. Each suite is designed in the manner of a private salon, with plush accommodations adorned with inlays, carvings, tapestries, carpeting, and antique furniture. The train's elegance extends to the dining cars, of which there are two, where beautifully prepared meals are served from menus that change daily. Two lounges—the Safari Bar and the Rajah Club—offer excellent places to relax with a day-ending drink, whether your preference is beer, wine, spirits, or cocktails.

Other features of the train are spacious passenger cabins with en suite bathrooms and individual climate control; on-board water filtration system; environmentally friendly toilet systems; 24-hour availability of on-board paramedic; and pneumatic suspension system for greater ride comfort.

Note about sleeping: Although the train ranks among the world's great luxury trains, it does not mean that a silk-smooth riding experience is assured at all times. While most people sleep well enough, some people do struggle a bit with occasional bouncing and rattling that is a product of the railroad tracks and railroad bed, not the train.

Pre-trip and Extension Information:

For both the pre- and post-trip extensions we will use the best accommodations available: The Baagh, and Infinity Resort at Kanha and Kaziranga National parks, respectively. Both properties offer high quality accommodations ranging from good to excellent. Both tours require a night in Delhi at the Radisson Blue. This hotel is near the airport and is the best option for a one-night stay in advance of flying to Kanha, or out of the country after Kaziranga.

Within the national parks of India, all visitors must ride in park service jeeps. Since only three passengers are allowed in the jeep, on some outings you will not be with the VENT leader. The VENT leader will rotate to the extent possible, allowing for an equal amount of time with all participants. The local guide as well as the park service guide will know the mammals and a great majority of the birds but may not be as knowledgeable as your VENT guide on some aspects of field identification. The VENT leader will let the park guides know what birds we may be searching for in particular so they can focus on certain desirable species. Many of the birds that we'll see in the parks are widespread species will be encountered elsewhere during the trip. Therefore, you will almost surely not miss any birds by virtue of being with local park staff during part of the time.

Food:

The food in India is outstanding and not just a plate of hot spices. In fact, on past VENT tours to India, many of our participants have felt that India's cuisine was one of the highlights of the trip. Excellent breads, tandoor cooked chicken, and a dazzling variety of vegetarian dishes can cater for any palate. Beef is generally not available due to religious reasons.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS:

Passports

A passport valid for at least six months after your trip return date is required for entry into India. You must also have at least two blank pages in your passport for stamps. Please check the expiration date on your passport.

If you need a passport, you should get it well in advance of your trip departure date. For additional fees, a passport can be issued on an expedited basis. In the United States this can be done at the nearest passport office, most post offices, or the county clerk's office. You may also visit www.state.gov/travel/ for information on how to get or renew a passport.

As a safety measure, photocopy the first two pages of your passport. Keep the photocopies in a safe place, so if your passport is lost you will have proof of identification. Your passport should be signed and easily available at all times. You will need it for check-in at the airport on your first day of departure, so **do not pack it in your checked luggage.**

Visas

A Tourist Visa is required for entry into India and must be obtained prior to departure. The visa can be obtained online (indianvisaonline.gov.in) or through Pinnacle Travel Document Systems, our recommended visa procurement service company (traveldocs.com on the web or 888-838-4867 by phone). For more information, please contact the India consulate nearest you. Non-U.S. citizens should check with their local Indian consulate or embassy for instructions.

CURRENCY & MONEY MATTERS: Your trip to India includes all necessary expenses; however, you will want to bring enough cash to cover any expenses not included in the program such as gifts, laundry, meals on your own, personal items, gratuities (optional), etc. Major credit cards are accepted at large establishments including hotels, restaurants, and shops, particularly in larger cities. Visa and MasterCard are accepted widely; less so for American Express. Smaller vendors and vendors in smaller communities may accept only cash, so it's recommended that you keep a supply of local currency handy. It is best to carry small denominations of cash as it can be difficult to break larger bills.

The Indian Rupee (INR) is the official currency of India. It is easy to exchange U.S. Dollars for Rupees at airport currency exchanges and at some of the larger hotels where we'll stay. You can also use ATMs if your card is compatible with the machine (many ATMs in India are of an older design). Cirrus is widely used, for example.

You can check the latest currency conversion rate by visiting "XE-The World's Favorite Currency Site" at: <http://www.xe.com/>.

Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

ELECTRICITY: Electrical power on board the train is supplied in 110/220 volts. Off the train, power in India is 230 volts, 50 cycles. A variety of electrical plugs are found throughout the country, so an all-around adaptor plug set is strongly recommended. "Type D" (Old British) is the most common type of outlet and accepts plug that feature three round pins arranged in a triangular configuration. The "Type C" outlet is also used widely and accepts plugs that feature two round pins in horizontal formation (Europlug). Some hotels have desks and workstations which accept a variety of plug types.

If you plan to use American standard 110V equipment with the flat-pronged plugs, you should also consider an all-purpose transformer to convert the current for 110V use, in addition to the adapter plug set. Electricity supplies can be erratic in remote areas or not capable of supporting high wattage items like hair dryers. Do not rely on an electric razor, or always having electricity available for charging your video batteries.

INTERNET: On the main tour, internet service will be available on the train and at all of the hotels in the itinerary. Internet speed may vary from good in the city to slow in rural areas. Aboard the train, speed may vary while the train is moving, but improves when it is stationary or near large cities. For the pre- and post-trip extensions, internet service is available in the lodges at the national parks; however, the service is typically slow or unreliable due to the remoteness of these locations.

LANGUAGE: Hindi and English are the official languages of India. Hindi is the most commonly spoken language, but English is widely spoken and used extensively for all signage. A multitude of other languages are spoken in India and vary geographically. Besides Hindi, other commonly encountered languages include Marathi and Urdu.

TIME: India is on India Standard Time (IST) and is 10:30 ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST).

HEALTH: As of this writing (February 2020), no major shots or inoculations are required for entry into India; however, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases, including the **Routine Vaccinations** (if you are not up-to-date), including measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine; diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine; and poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers who have received a primary series with either inactivated poliovirus vaccine (IPV) or oral polio vaccine (OPV); they should receive another dose of IPV before departure); and your yearly flu shot.

Other considerations:

Strongly Recommended Vaccines/Prophylaxis: Immunization against **Hepatitis A and B** are strongly recommended as general preventive measures regardless of where in the world a person travels. Immunization against **Typhoid** is recommended for travel to India. Hepatitis A and Typhoid are diseases of contaminated food and water and are present in India. Hepatitis B is a disease of contaminated bodily fluid and needles. Travelers without the Hepatitis B vaccination are at risk in the event a medical procedure is necessary.

Personal Medications: If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the trip safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As

airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

Malaria: Malaria is present in India but the risk to travelers is considered no higher than moderate. VENT has never had a participant contract Malaria on an India tour; however, because we cannot guarantee that it is not a possibility, we recommend that you check with your health care provider and/or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for more information and to determine whether an anti-malarial regimen is right for you. Please note that the strain of Malaria present in India is of the Chloroquine-resistant type.

Food, water, and general sanitation: Sanitation is not great in India; however, it has improved radically during the many years that VENT has operated tours here—largely as a result of greatly improved hygiene and the widespread availability of bottled water. To avoid getting sick (traveler's diarrhea, for example) you should not drink the water anywhere in India, even in the nicer hotels. Bottled water will be available everywhere, and beer, soda, and other bottled drinks are safe. You are advised to avoid eating uncooked or partially cooked food or food that has been cooling in the open. Only eat fruit that you have peeled, preferably first washing the outside with clean water. Remember the old adage: "Boil it, peel it, or forget it."

Biting insects: For the most part, biting insects are not an anticipated problem, particularly at this time of the year. However, the exception could be around areas with standing water, such as we'll find at several of the birding areas. In these cases, mosquitoes could be present. Mosquito repellent will be provided by the VENT staff, but if you prefer to bring your own, we suggest a lotion or stick-type repellent for your face and hands, plus at least one pump-style container of repellent for your clothing.

Air pollution: As is widely reported, the air quality in India has deteriorated markedly in the last decade. Pollution resulting from auto and factory emissions and field fires are the primary culprits, especially in the bigger cities. We have been advised by our agent that the peak time for smog is mid-December to mid-January, and that the situation improves thereafter. It is also important to note that the tour spends limited amounts of time in the large cities of Mumbai, at the beginning of the tour, and in Delhi at the end. Delhi, in particular, has earned a reputation for having especially poor air quality at certain times of the year. We emphasize that we spend only a day-and-a-half here before departing either for home or on the extension (if you are part of it). Due to limited exposure to poor air quality, we do not recommend as essential any protective devices; however, you may want to consider precautionary measures such as a scarf, wrap, or surgical mask to cover your nose and mouth. If you suffer from breathing problems or associated medical issues, please consult your physician before registering for this tour. If you are especially concerned about air quality, you might consider purchasing an air pollution mask, available at various online stores. You might also consider departing the tour on the night of February 24 following our arrival in Delhi.

Sun Exposure: The sun's ultraviolet rays are dangerous under prolonged exposure (sometimes only a matter of minutes). Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. A severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

If there is any doubt as to your physical fitness to travel, consultation should be sought with your doctor before registering for this trip. In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line 800-CDC-INFO (232-4636) or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING: A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend www.amazon.com which has a wide selection; www.buteobooks.com and www.nhbs.com which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and www.abebooks.com for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Birds:

Grimmett, Richard and Carol and Tim Inskipp, *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. Helm Field Guides. Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing, revised edition, 2016. **This field guide is the most important resource for this trip. It covers all of the birds we are likely to see.**

Grimmett, Richard and Carol and Tim Inskipp, *Birds of India: Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Second Edition, 2012.

Mammals:

Menon, Vivek. *Field Guide to Indian Mammals*. Helm Field Guides. Helm Publishing, 2009. **An excellent and complete resource on the mammals of India by one of the country's top wildlife biologists. Highly recommended.**

Gurung, K.K. and Raj Singh. *Field Guide to the Mammals of the Indian Subcontinent*. Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 1998.

Reptiles:

Daniel, J.C. *The Book of Indian Reptiles and Amphibians*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

History: Many fine resources are available to the history and culture of India. The following selections are all highly regarded, but represent a sample of what is available.

Basham, A.L. *The Wonder that Was India*. Picador Publishing (India), 2014

Collins, Larry. *Freedom at Midnight*. Harper Collins Publishers, second edition, 1997.

Fischer, Louis. *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World*. New York: Signet Publishing, reprint edition, 2010.

Guha, Ramachandra. *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. Harper Perennial, 2008.

Kulke, Hermann and Dietmar Rothermund. *A History of India*. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2016.

TIPPING: All tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, local guides, and train staff) is included. If you feel one or all of your VENT leaders, or any local guide has provided exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where this is necessary,

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notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect February 19, 2020 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.

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