India - Northern

Birds & Big Game (Relaxed)

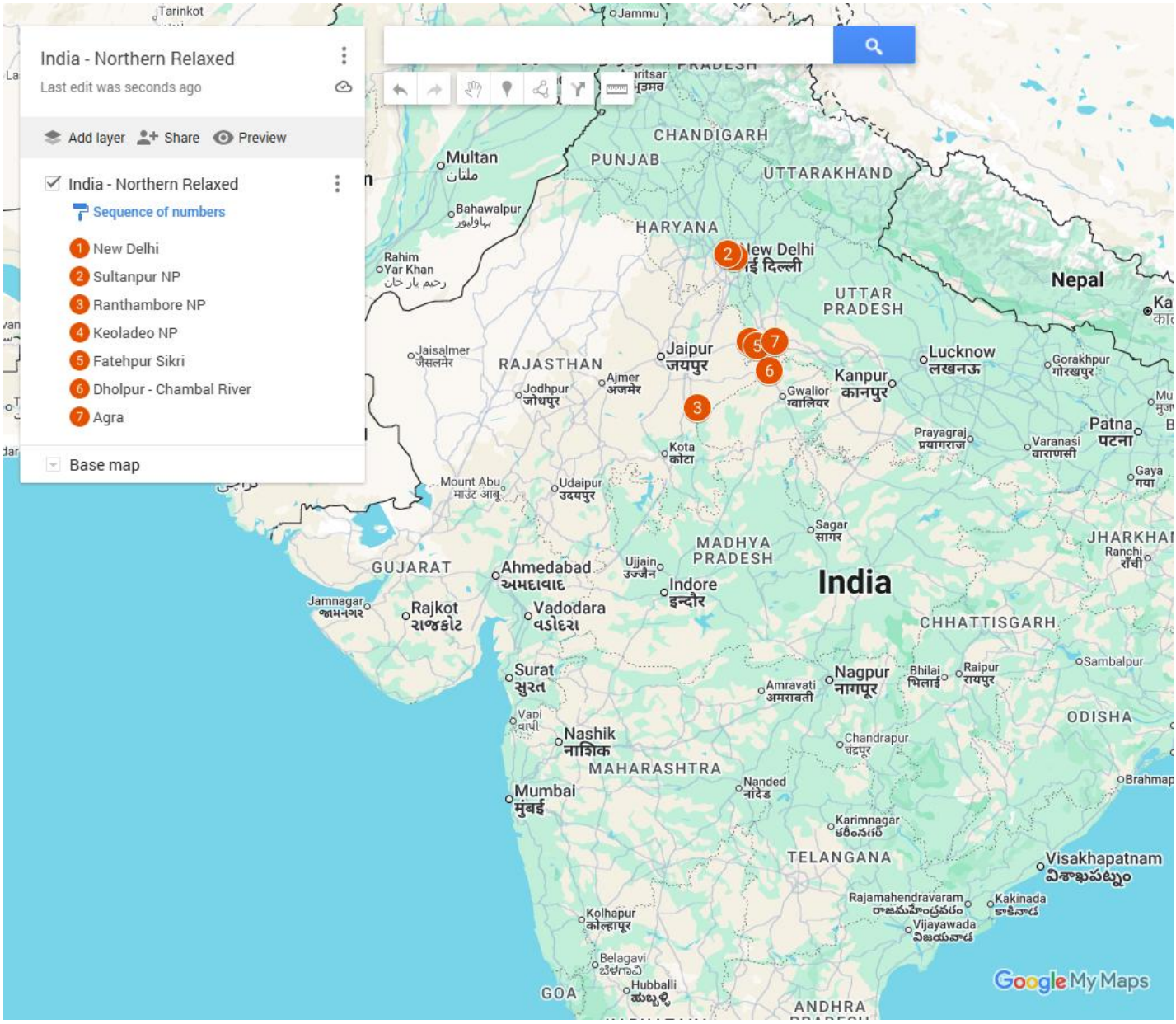


Taj Mahal by Daniel Danckwerts

Home to over a billion people in arguably the world's richest cultural landscape, India is a country with no equal. This great nation boasts a staggering geographical diversity ranging from deserts and forests to tropical, palm-lined shores and snow-capped peaks. India is, of course, also famous for its rich avifauna and iconic mammalian megafauna, foremost of which is the regal Bengal Tiger. Our tour visits the core mammal, birding and cultural sites including the fabled Ranthambhore National Park, the exquisite wetlands of Keoladeo and incomparable Taj Mahal. Join us in this unforgettable celebration of India's incredible birds, iconic mammals, dramatic scenery, and kaleidoscope of cultures!

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arrival into New Delhi**
Day 2	**Sultanpur National Park**
Day 3	**New Delhi, train to Ranthambhore**
Days 4 to 6	**Ranthambhore National Park**
Days 7	**Ranthambhore National Park, transfer to Bharatpur**
Days 8 & 9	**Keoladeo National Park**
Day 10	**Bharatpur to Dholphur via Fatehpur Sikri**
Day 11	**Chambal River & Dholphur**
Day 12	**Dholphur to Agra, Taj Mahal**
Day 13	**Taj Mahal to New Delhi**
Day 14	**Final departure**



Birding sites in detail



Displaying Indian Peafowl by Glen Valentine

Sultanpur National Park. Sultanpur National Park or Sultanpur Jheel, as it more commonly referred to, was proclaimed as a national park in 1991. It is located to the southwest of New Delhi in the state of Haryana. It offers an excellent introduction to Indian birding with over 300 species having been recorded here. We intend to spend the morning here, taking in Acacia woodland, the jheel itself, cultivated fields, pastures and semi-desert areas using the trail that circumnavigates the lake.

The water level of the jheel does vary from season to season and is largely dependent on the rainfall from the previous summer monsoon. We will scan the wetland and its fringes for species such as striking Painted and Black-necked Storks, Little and Indian Cormorants, Indian Pond Heron, Bar-headed Goose, Indian Spot-billed Duck, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Red-crested and Common Pochards, Ferruginous Duck, Grey-headed Swamphen, Red-naped Ibis and White-tailed Lapwing.

Exploring the woodland and scrubby areas may produce White-throated Kingfisher, Indian Robin, Red-vented Bulbul, Spotted Owlet, Ashy Prinia, Black Drongo, Black Redstart, Large Grey, and Jungle Babblers, Black-rumped Flameback, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Eurasian Hoopoe, Hume's Leaf Warbler and Purple Sunbird. With some luck we may find the scarce Sind Sparrow, Black-breasted Weaver, Red Avadavat, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Bluethroat and even Orange-headed Thrush. Raptors that we will be on the lookout for include Indian Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Western Marsh Harrier, and Western Osprey. We should also get excellent views of Nilgai (Blue Bull), while possibilities exist for Golden Jackal, Indian Fox, and Jungle Cat.

Ranthambhore National Park. We will now focus our attention on the deciduous forests, woodlands, and lakes of the central plateau at Ranthambhore National Park.

The tropical dry deciduous and thorn forest covers an area of more than 1 300km^2 (500m^2); needless to say, there is plenty of area to roam! Dominated by the 10th Century Ranthambhore Fort which sits atop a plateau 700ft above the plains, this scenic reserve contains high concentrations of herbivores such as Chital (Spotted Deer), Sambar and Wild Boar, and it is this abundance of prey species that supports one of the healthiest populations of Tiger anywhere on Earth.



Red Avadavat by Adam Riley



Bengal Tiger by Adam Riley

Locating these magnificent cats requires a combination of skill and patience – and, of course, a small dose of luck!

We will use open-top jeeps and/or canter vans to explore the park in search of Tigers, watching for tell-tale signs such as pugmarks or scat in the road and listening for the alarm calls of Sambar, Chital, Southern Plains Grey Langurs and Indian Peafowl. With luck, these will lead us to a Tiger padding along a dusty track or sprawled out in the dappled sunlight of a bamboo thicket. Looking into the amber eyes of this, the largest of all the big cats, undoubtedly ranks as one of the world's ultimate wildlife experiences! In addition to Tigers and their favourite prey species, during our safari drives, we may also come across Ruddy Mongoose or even Jungle Cat, Leopard, and Sloth Bear.



Painted Spurfowl by Adam Riley

Although our main reason for visiting Ranthambhore is to search for Tiger, the rich woods and meadows of this scenically stunning park also offer excellent birding and the valley floors support good numbers of Painted Spurfowl, Jungle and Rock Bush Quail, the uncommon White-naped Woodpecker, Indian Scops Owl, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Alexandrine and Plum-headed Parakeets, Stork-billed Kingfisher, Sirkeer Malkoha, Common Iora, White-bellied Drongo, Tickell's Blue



Plum-headed Parakeets by Adam Riley

Flycatcher (which can often be located by its sweet song given from dense bamboo patches), the active White-browed Fantail, Grey-breasted and Rufous-fronted Prinias and Yellow-throated Sparrow.

While in the area, we will also keep our eyes peeled for Indian Vulture, Pallid Harrier, Shikra, Bonelli's Eagle, and Crested Serpent Eagle.

We will also take the opportunity to bird around our lodge, which regularly produces the endemic Painted Sandgrouse, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Indian Roller, Indian Stone-curlew, Brahminy Starling, Common Woodshrike and Ashy-crowned sparrow-Lark, whilst a good degree of luck is required to find Marshall's Iora.

Soorwal Lake. If time permits, we may visit this lake to search for a host of water associated birds that could include Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, Spotted Redshank, Temminck's Stint, Common Ringed Plover, Indian Courser, Indian Stone-curlew, Green Bee-eater, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Indian Bush Lark, Moustached Warbler, Ashy and Yellow-bellied Prinias, Rosy Starling and the ever-popular Greater Painted-snipe.

Keoladeo National Park. We will base ourselves a few minutes from the entrance to the incredible Keoladeo National Park. Usually known simply as 'Bharatpur', the extensive series of shallow ponds were artificially created as a duck-shooting preserve by a former Maharaja of Bharatpur but is now a wetland sanctuary attracting thousands of wintering waterfowl, waders, cranes, and raptors.

We'll explore the riches of this amazing reserve on foot and by bicycle rickshaw, following the network of raised dykes that criss-cross the labyrinth of ponds. Scanning through the waterbirds is usually our priority and we will likely be overwhelmed by the staggering numbers of species.

Possibilities include the beautiful Bar-headed Goose, whose migration sees them travelling from northern China over the high Himalayan Mountain ranges to winter here on the plains. Other species may include Garganey, Northern Pintail, Lesser Whistling, Indian Spot-billed and Ferruginous Ducks, Red-crested Pochard, Cotton Pygmy Goose, Common and Pied Kingfishers, Little and Indian Cormorants, Oriental Darter, Grey and Purple Herons, Great, Yellow-billed and Little Egrets, Black-crowned Night Heron, Painted, Woolly-necked and Black-necked Storks, Asian Openbill, Black-headed Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Pheasant-tailed and Bronze-



Rufous Treepie by Adam Riley



Sarus Cranes by David Hoddinott

winged Jacanas, White-breasted Waterhen, Grey-headed Swamphen, Black Bittern and Black-winged Stilt. Regal and elegant Sarus Cranes are often heard calling before they are seen striding over the flooded grasslands.

The marshy edges attract a variety of migrant passerines, including the secretive Bluethroat, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Rosy Pipit, Western Yellow, Citrine and White-browed Wagtails, whilst Wire-tailed Swallows hawk insects overhead. Raptors are especially well represented at Bharatpur, with concentrations of large migrant eagles such as Eastern Imperial, Greater Spotted, Steppe and Indian Spotted being of special interest. Other raptors we may find include Western Marsh Harrier and Laggar Falcon.

Extensive areas of arid Acacia dominated woodland and dry grasslands surround the ponds and we will be sure to explore this habitat for Black-rumped Flameback, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Indian Grey Hornbill, Greater Coucal, Brahminy Starling, the very uncommon and localised Marshall's Iora, White-eared Bulbul, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher, Zitting Cisticola, Purple Sunbird, Baya Weaver, and small flocks of Indian Silverbill. These Indian residents share their habitat during the winter months with a wide range of migrants from northern Asia, notably Red-breasted Flycatcher, the scarce Brooks's Leaf Warbler, skulking Siberian Rubythroat, Olive-backed Pipit, and Isabelline Wheatear.

We will also search for the nocturnal residents at their day roosts, including Dusky Eagle-Owl, Spotted Owlet and Large-tailed Nightjar, while a visit to the plant nursery may produce a wintering Orange-headed, Scaly, or even Tickell's Thrush. Mammals we should see include groups of the huge Nilgai (Blue Bull), largest of all, Asian antelope, as well as Golden Jackal, Sambar, and the attractive Five Striped Palm Squirrel.

Reptiles such as the huge Flap-shelled Turtle are often seen sunbathing on dry land, Water Monitors patrol for prey items and Checkered Keelbacks are often seen sunbathing just above the water. If we are very lucky, we may even come across an Indian Rock Python sunning itself.

Fatehpur Sikri. The ancient city of Fatehpur Sikri is an amazingly well-preserved historical city constructed by Mughal emperor Akbar in 1570, which served as the empire's capital from 1571 until 1585. Though it took 15 years to build, it was abandoned after only 14 years because the water supply was unable to sustain the



Black-necked Stork by Forrest Rowland



Bar-headed Goose by Adam Walleyn

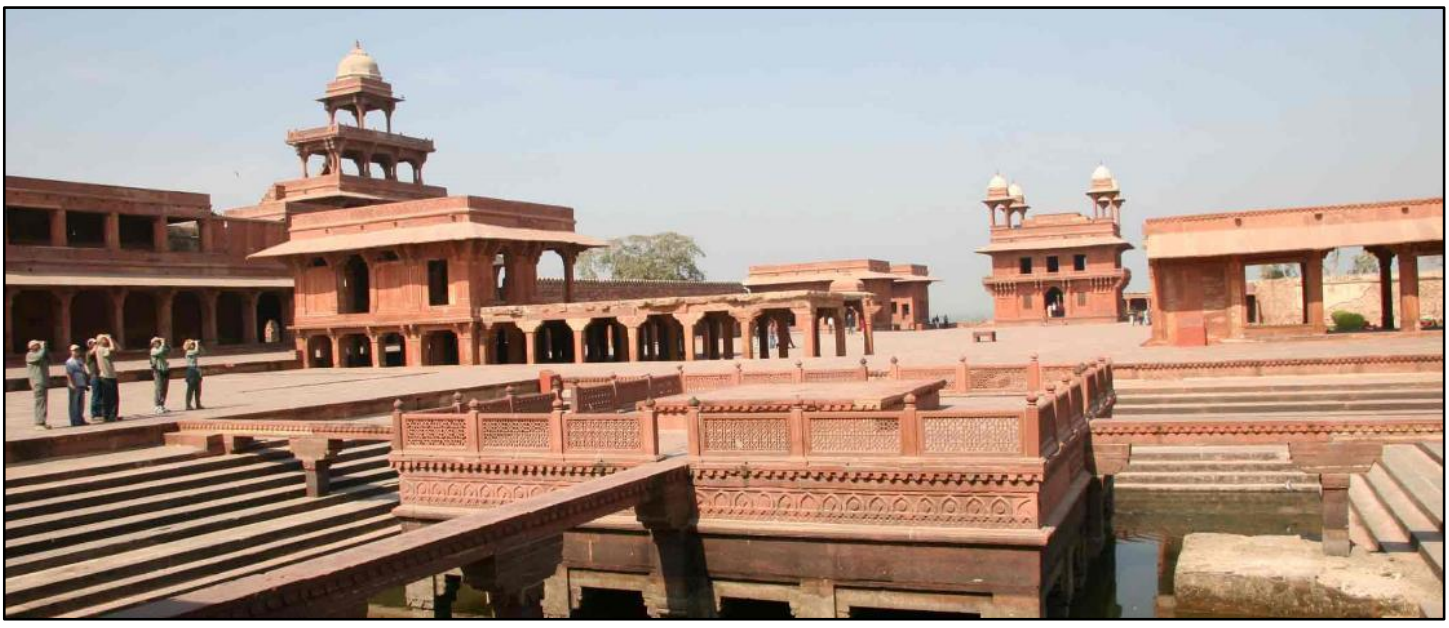
growing population. Today numerous notable imperial buildings and a fabulous mosque still stand, and a visit to Fatehpur Sikri is a truly memorable experience.

Chambal River. We head towards the town of Dholpur on the Chambal River where we will take lunch before proceeding on a boat trip. Despite the presence of this majestic river, the area is surprisingly dry. We will focus our attentions on the river itself, searching for several river specialists. The endangered Indian Skimmer, one of our main reasons for visiting this reliable site, can often be found on islands in the river together with Black-bellied and River Terns.

During our boat trip, we will do a lot of shoreline scanning and this could turn up other exciting species in the form of Ruddy Shelduck, Black Stork, Red-naped Ibis, Small Pratincole, Long-legged Buzzard, Laggar Falcon, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, River Lapwing, Pallas's Gull, Great Stone-curlew, Desert Wheatear, and possibly even Indian Eagle-Owl roosting on the small cliff faces.

We will also be keeping a sharp eye out for one of the rarer inhabitants of this river, the unique Ganges River Dolphin that is confined largely to the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers and their tributaries. Another rare species we should encounter is the bizarre, long-snouted Gharial – one of the most localised and critically endangered crocodilians on the planet, together with Mugger Crocodile and Flap-shelled Turtle.

We may have some time to search the woodlands around our lodge grounds, which often hold wintering migrants such as Verditer Flycatcher and Booted and Sykes's Warblers, as well as Indian Flying Fox. At night we



Fatehpur Sikri by Adam Riley



Indian Courser by Clayton Burne

may take a short walk to look for Brown Hawk-Owl and even Common Palm Civet, which is sometimes found in the trees around the lodge grounds.

Dholpur area. Heading slightly west of the Dholpur, we'll spend an hour or two birding the grassy plains, interspersed with scrubby brush. This relatively newly discovered birding site has some very interesting species such as the endemic Sykes's Lark, as well as healthy populations of the normally scarce Indian Courser. Whilst walking and scanning the plains, we should find Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Egyptian Vulture, Desert, Isabelline and Variable Wheatears, Isabelline Shrike and Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark.

Agra & Taj Mahal. We head to Agra for the cultural highlight of the trip, the simply magnificent Taj Mahal, literally meaning "Crown of Palaces". It is also a World Heritage Site and is famous for the elegance of its design, its extraordinary translucent white marble dome, its mathematical symmetry, and the immense numbers of intricately carved and inlaid semi-precious stones that adorn its walls. Begun in 1632, tens of thousands of architects and labourers, and over a thousand elephants, toiled for more than 20 years to complete this breath-taking edifice, which was commissioned by the grief-stricken Shah Jahan after his third wife died during the birth of their 14th child. This is without a doubt one of India's most iconic and impressive sites and should not be missed!

In Agra, we will also visit the fabled Agra Red Fort, located in the centre of the city and serving as a monumental reminder of the fascinating history of the region. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is more accurately a 94-acre walled city and was constructed in the 16th century. Exploring this architecturally spectacular complex is fascinating and from here we will also enjoy further views of the shimmering marble Taj Mahal. In fact, Shah Jahan spent his final years here at the Agra Fort as a captive of his son Aurangzeb who deposed him. Shah Jahan apparently died here whilst imprisoned in a tower with a view of the Taj Mahal.



Indian Skimmer by Adam Riley



Gharial by Adam Riley

Whilst marvelling at these impressive historical sites, we will no doubt also keep an eye out for birds, and species that we may encounter include Brown Rock Chat and Dusky Crag Martin which call these buildings home, families of Spotted Owlets in the gardens, raptors (Egyptian Vultures are frequently seen around the Taj Mahal), and waterbirds on the holy Yamuna River, including the elegant River Lapwing.

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease	■ ■ ■	Undemanding. Suitable for all birding / wildlife interest levels. India is an assault on the senses first time around, requiring a little tolerance to begin with.
Birding Ease	■ ■ ■	Undemanding. Most species provide good visuals in open conditions. Mostly savanna & woodland birding.
Accommodation	■ ■ ■	Comfortable to very comfortable.
Walking / Trails	■ ■ ■	Mostly on gently undulating roads/lodge gardens. Bicycle rickshaws at Keoladeo NP.
Vehicles / Roads	■ ■ ■	Busses, train, 4x4 & open safari vehicles. Variable to poor road conditions. Vehicles are manufactured to local requirements, so tend to be a on the small size for Westerners.
Photography	■ ■ ■	Good to excellent. From vehicle and in lodge gardens.
Annoyances	■ ■ ■	Slow traffic, poor road conditions. Spicy food, strong smells of various types. Can be cold on early morning safaris.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 14;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour (including train transport);
- Boat excursion on the Chambal River;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

Our Relaxed series of tours are designed to focus on having an enjoyable holiday with a bird and wildlife focus. Where possible; we have reduced or removed long drives, single night stays and poor/rustic accommodation. We have also sought to reduce or remove difficult hikes, narrow/muddy trails and otherwise oppressive environmental conditions. Early starts and night birding are mostly optional, and we will not spend much time searching for difficult and/or skulking species. These tours are not suitable for hardcore birders and listers, or dedicated photographers.

- Roads outside of Indian cities are poorly maintained, causing vehicles to travel very slowly. To make best use of our time, we use train journeys to cut travel times and increase both comfort and safety. Our local agents, tour leaders and porters ensure that all your luggage is stowed aboard at embarkation, as well as taken off and transferred to our vehicles at disembarkation. The train rides are generally smooth, and relatively quiet, allowing you to process photos, update social media or simply to rest.
- Rest rooms on trains vary in cleanliness. Facilities are of the squat toilet type, typically little more than a cubicle with a hole in the carriage floor.
- **We no longer make use of any OVERNIGHT trains on our northern India tours.**
- It is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20 kg (44 lb) for check in luggage and 8 kg (+-18 lb) for hand luggage.
- This tour does not require a high level of fitness, but participants should be in good general health as some of the birding will be done on foot and may require walking for several hours at a time.
- It is not permissible to leave the open safari vehicles within Ranthambhore National Parks, except at designated sites.
- If you have any physical or medical limitations or conditions, please notify us in advance of departure.
- For much of this tour we will be far away from modern medical facilities.
- Accommodation throughout the trip is of a good standard, and the hotels and resorts that we make use of range from comfortable to rather luxurious. There is no camping on this trip.
- Overnight temperatures can be cool and it is advisable to bring layered clothing for warmth and convenience.
- The open jeep tours can be very cold (especially in the mornings), please bring sufficient warm clothing, including gloves, scarf/buff and a beanie (woolly hat).

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour begins in New Delhi on day 1 with a welcome dinner, and as this is scheduled as an arrival day; you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude after breakfast in New Delhi on day 14.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi (IATA: DEL) is the main port of entry for international flights into India.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.