

A Passage through India!

by Fred and Elizabeth Hodgson - March 27th - April 16th 2008

Starring:.....

Mrs Moore Elizabeth.

Doctor Aziz Vinod Goswami

Ali Jakdish Pravesh.

Ronny Heaslop Fred

Prof. Godbole Richard Attenborough.

Taxi driver Don Estelle.

Body at Railway station The late Mr Patel.

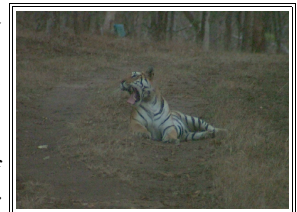
Mrs Moore's wardrobe by Oxfam, Photography by FujiFinepix, Transport by Indian Railways and Babaar the Elephant. Cultural advice by Windsor Davies and La di dah "Gunner" Graham.

Locations and ground arrangements by Exotic Journeys Pvt, Ltd.,

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Act One. Delhi, India. After a decent flight we arrived at IGIA and were taken to Uppal's Orchid for rest and brush up. This is set in 10 acres of tidy grounds and thus the tick list got off to a good start with Brown-headed Barbet which is more often heard than seen. Then after stocking up with supplies it was off through the Delhi streets to the Railway station where we gained access to our allotted seats without excessive violence or bloodshed! The A.P Express pulled out on time after which we ate our snacks and retired, waking next morning to rolling hills and farming country. On schedule we arrived at Nagpur and were duly met and exchanged the peace of the train for the chaos of city traffic and surrounding country.

Act Two. Pench Jungle Camp, A rural drive, if such can exist in India, got us to our camp in time for a light lunch. This is a very pleasant Tented camp with some of the largest tents we have ever been in. Set on Marble Plinths, with self contained facilities and air conditioning! We had five days here and thoroughly enjoyed it. The gardens were a bit scrubby, away from the main manicured areas around the Restaurant & Reception but good for birds. More ticks including Flameback, Coppersmith Barbet, Greater Coucal and Small Minivet. This is Kipling country, the author not the cakes silly, and the Park authorities have taken to the Disney Jungle Book version with enthusiasm. Most official signs around Park HQ sported one or more characters from the film. The Park Gate was about 10 minutes away and our routine was to leave at 5.45 to gain entrance at 6. This was repeated at 15.30 for the evening drive with the Park closing at 18.30. We both found the scenery in this Park very beautiful indeed with open spaces, the Pench river and high rocky hills. The main woodland areas are relatively open and visibility not restricted. It did rain, quite hard, but this did not mar our pleasure at all. All drives were very productive of Birds, including the ubiquitous Collared Scops Owl which Elizabeth is convinced operate much as a Swiss Cuckoo Clock and appear at their roosting hole 'window' each hour on the dot. Cheetal were prolific, Sambar numerous but Blue Bull (Nilgai) plentiful but very shy. We saw many Jackals, no Wild Dogs and several Gaur (Bison) and Wild Boar. Our guide (Jakdish) found us plenty of birds. Leopards appeared from time to time but strangely never in trees, always sloping about on foot. There are 27 Tigers in the reserve, which featured on the recent TV series on BBC with the Ellie Cams. We saw two by Elephant Show, where a Tiger is found and we then flag down a passing Pachyderm, shin up a ladder that we just happen to have handy, and are transported to where Shere Khan is lurking in the Jungle. A photo shoot then ensues. A bit artificial I suppose but better than no Tiger at all. Better though to find one yourself by car which we did one evening. We had found a very co-operative Leopard and watched for some time until it was time to head for the Gate. We had driven no more than 400 yards when Jak said "Tiger!" We all expected a distant fleeting glimpse but he was pointing just off the track where we found an absolutely gorgeous Tigress lying on a side trail just metres from the track we were on. It was 18.30 and the light fading fast but we managed some nice pictures nevertheless. This was one of the defining moments of the trip. So we left Pench with a score of three Tigers and four Leopards. A very beautiful park with lots of wildlife and extremely hospitable lodgings.



Act Three. Kanha, The Baagh! Bidding goodbye to all we moved off for yet another interesting drive through rural India to Kanha National Park which took about four hours and where we had booked a seven night stay. The Baagh is modeled on a small village of small traditional houses, each one containing self contained units. All air conditioned and very comfortable. There is a large central Restaurant area and what will be mature landscaped gardens one day. It was dry and the lakes were empty. We did disturb Painted Francolin in the grounds but saw no sign of the resident pair of Bengal Foxes. We were made very welcome by the resident owner Col. Shyam Singh, the elder of the team of brothers, and a naturalist of some repute. All staff were very accommodating and the food excellent. Our daily drive took us about 8km to the Park's Mukki Gate through nice rural villages. The Park itself was very different in that the trees were denser which made viewing harder although Kanha is famous for its open 'Meadows' and many Nullahs (dry rivers favoured by sleeping cats.) We did not see any but lots of Pug marks. There were no Nilgai here but many more Gaur of which we saw herds of up to 25. Our driver, Ramesh, was understandably nervous of these beasts, the world's largest Bovine, and got upset when having already passed very close to a large Bull we asked for a repeat as we did not get the shot we wanted on the first pass. There is a healthy population of Dhole, Indian Wild Dog, in this park and once, whilst

engrossed in getting nice pictures of a friendly Gaur, a pack of 22 wandered out of the jungle and posed for us before going on their way. One evening drive I got to feed and groom the riding elephant team at their quarters deep in the Jungle. The Park was busier and this caused large numbers of vehicles at the parks HQ at breakfast time. We had less luck with tigers here despite a higher population although other people were luckier. However we did get one tiger show and got close to several others on our daily drives. We also tracked and found a mating pair of Leopards, the male being a particularly fine dark specimen. Then one morning our luck changed and during a drive back to the gate we saw an Elephant in a meadow and the Mahout called out to us that a tiger was close and heading our way. A 'red' patch in the grass then came closer and right in front of our car out came a large tigress who fixed us with a hard stare. She lay down and cleaned herself before getting up and approaching us even closer. Driver Ramesh moved away and stopped at



a 'safe' distance of 15 metres which she promptly closed to the minimum allowed of 5. The process was repeated in a series of stop/goes for over 2 km with Elizabeth and I leaning over the back of the car scarcely believing our luck at such close encounters with this magnificent beast. My goal of seeing a tiger in the wild was achieved in large measure. We were told later that this lady was of uncertain temper and prone to acts of aggression. The chattering sound must have been Ramesh's teeth and knees. So we ended our search for tigers well pleased with a grand score of five Tigers and six Leopards. We did well for birds too with nice views of Brown Fish Owl, Snipe and Sarus Cranes among others.

Intermission! Next came another drive to Jaibalpur and the overnight Mahakaushal Express to Agra. This was most notable for the fight that broke out in the middle of the night between the conductor and a very irate family who seemed to have a problem with their sleeping arrangements. The train was full so they kept arriving in our carriage where there was more room. Eventually I had had enough and threw them all out with the advice that by definition "sleeping compartments" were for sleeping and if they wished to fight they should go to the "fighting carriage". We awoke to a new face in the bunk below!

Act Four. Agra. The culture bit. Pickup by Mr Dawacka and Nandi and driven to Clark's Shiraz. Very nice place indeed. Even better, a clear view of the Taj Mahal from our bedroom window. (No need to go now?). Settled in and snoozed before being driven by Nandi to Agra Fort and Mum Taj under the excellent guidance of Raju. I queried spelling and he tells me his mum named him after a Bollywood Actor! He knew his Agra and we were impressed. Did the tourist trap bit on the way back and bought a nice 'original' painting and some clothes. A communication problem meant we missed eating in the Roof-top Restaurant and got stuck with 'group' tourists. The meal was OK but 'westernised'. Next day it was early doors for the six a.m. opening of the Taj Mahal for the sunrise bit! Again Nandi and Raju got us through the throng and produced tickets without appearing to queue! A variation of the Indian Rope Trick perhaps? Raju also got us to the prime spots so our pictures were not marred by the assorted heads of others. (The trick is to go the "wrong way" round. i.e. In the Exit. This IS India!) After the usual posing photos, including a candid one of your scribe actually caught birdwatching in such hallowed surroundings, (Asian Koel if you must know!) we left and headed for Fatehpur Sikri which is another impressive pile of bricks. End of Culture and Raju left us to return to Agra with Nandi driving us on to Bharatpur.

Act Five. Keoladeo NP. Booked in to the very Impressive "Bagh", the Jewel in the brothers Singh's Crown. A 200 year old Pink Marble Palace set in manicured grounds. Easily the friendliest and best place of the trip. Food was extraordinarily good with the Waiters going to special lengths to explain the Cuisine. We were here for 3 nights! At 2.30 we set off for a first visit to Kideapo and met up with guide Jakdish once more. The Park is best in winter with the myriads of Migrant Fowl but we had exchanged this for spring to maximise tiger chances which was a good trade off. I had been before in December and was fascinated to see all the water had dried up. The dry land was producing good grazing for Cheetal, Sambur and the tameest Nilgai I have ever met. (So much for my efforts in Pench!) Exploration is on TrikeShaw and Jak had organised this. He had also organised some off piste excursions forbidden to ordinary mortals but having a father as Head Warden does have certain advantages. With the seasonal departure of the waterfowl the Raptors had also gone but we ticked Bonelli's Eagle, various Owls, Black necked Storks and Indian Courser among others. Next day we went up to Bund Barita, a large reservoir about 2 hours away and caught up with some Waterfowl. Then it was back in Keoladeo for our last full day at the end of which the tick list reached 242.

Final Act. Delhi again. This was a totally different day comprising the 5 hour drive to Delhi and our arrival in the chaotic city itself. We lost count of the overloaded buses and scooters but Nandi outdid them all and we got there without mishap. It was only then I noticed the Skull and Crossbones on his Registration plate. We were booked into the comfortable JP Vasant which was very pleasant. Met by Vinod and de-briefed on an excellent trip. The culture shock came on checking into our room and finding instead of the Taj Mahal there was a nice view of MacDonald's Double Arch. Illuminated too! Our final meal was possibly the best yet.

Epilogue. Collected by Vinod for our flight home and competently steered through formalities at the Airport. The man has good contacts. Comfortable flight home on time and luggage 1st off Carousel. So far so good. Then the wheels came off and our flight to IOM was very late and overbooked. So we got a free night in the Hilton and an offer we could not refuse for our trouble. This was a seamless holiday and a credit to Exotic. Fred earned his Stripes!