

TREASURES OF THE GANGES

(Delhi, Agra, Gwalior, Orcha, Khajuraho, Benares; 6 UNESCO WHS and much more!)



14 days/13 nights ITINERARY

Trip starts & ends in New Delhi

Day 1

On arrival in New Delhi we transfer to The Imperial, Delhi's best Heritage hotel (1 night).

After lunch there is some light sightseeing. Dinner at our hotel.

Day 2

AM After breakfast we depart by road to Agra, where we stay 1 night at The Trident Hotel.

PM We head for the Taj Mahal, to experience it at sunset, the best time of day! Built in 22 years in the early 17C by Shah Jahan as a tomb for his beloved Mumtaz Mahal this building is rightly considered without comparison anywhere in the world. UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Agra is in Uttar Pradesh and like Delhi, with which it alternated as Mughal capital, lies on the banks of the sacred river Yamuna. Akbar the Great spent his youth here before building his new capital 37km west at Fatehpur Sikri. He abandoned the latter for Lahore and only returned to Agra in 1599 for the last six years of his life. Jahangir left Agra for Kashmir in 1618 never to return and Shah Jahan, despite modifying Agra's Red Fort and building the Taj Mahal, also moved away in 1638 to his new city Shah Jahanabad, the current 'Old Delhi'. He spent his last 7 years imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb in Agra's Red Fort. The latter finally abandoned Agra shifting the Mughal capital to Delhi.

Day 3

AM Morning visit of Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's stunning abandoned capital 45 minutes drive from Agra. It took 14 years to build and was inhabited for only 5 before being deserted. It is the most extensive and best-preserved Mughal site in the world. UNESCO World Heritage Site.

PM After lunch we drive (1.5h) south to Raj Niwas Palace, Dholpur where we stay for 2 nights in their very comfortable suites. Late afternoon Chambal River boat safari, the world's best sanctuary for Gharial and Gangetic Dolphin.

Day 4

Jeep safari in the surrounding country, with a royal hunting lodge in the forest, a sacred lake surrounded by temples, walking along the banks of huge artificial lakes built by Mughal Emperors, pavilions and 'ghats', farmsteads and villages. We lunch at a lovely lakeside property owned by Raj Niwas Palace. Mid afternoon return and time off to walk the extensive grounds of the palace, including its organic vegetable garden, swim in the inviting pool, or have a spa treatment.

Day 5

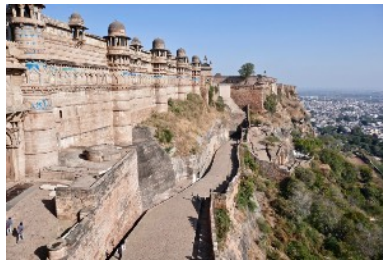
AM Depart by road for Gwalior (1.5hrs) where we stay 2 nights at the Taj Group's Usha Kiran Palace Hotel, once the guest wing of the Scindia Royal Palace.

PM Visit of Jai Vilas Palace one of the largest private residences in India. Gwalior's Scindia Maharajas were one of only 5 families awarded a 21-gun salute by the British. Their Italianate palazzo-like royal residence houses one of the most idiosyncratic collection of royal possessions in India.

Day 6

AM Walk up to and visit of the huge Gwalior Fort complex, one of India's finest with magnificent views over the surrounding country. Its history goes back to 8 AD when a hermit saint, Gwalipa, cured the chieftain Suraj Sen of leprosy. In gratitude he founded and named the city after him. The fort, described by the first Mughal Emperor Babur as: "The pearl amongst fortresses in Hind", stands on a sandstone precipice 91m above the plains, 2.8 km long, and 200-850 m wide. Its cliffs have huge Jain sculptures carved into the bedrock.

PM At Leisure.



Day 7

Departure by road for Orcha, past capital of a kingdom, where we stay 1 night. After lunch we visit the bustling village and the extensive 17th-century palaces complex.

Day 8

AM Departure by road for Sarai at Toria, our lovely camp in Panna National Park for the next 3 nights. On the way we have lunch in Khajuraho, a small village in Madhya Pradesh famed for India's best preserved 10th-11th-century temples.

PM Afternoon visit of the Western Temple Complex, set in landscaped grounds. Built by the Chandela kings between 950 – 1050 AD, the 20 surviving temples (Of an original 85) are renowned for their erotic sculptures. They were 'lost' for centuries until being accidentally discovered by a British Army engineer in 1839. UNESCO WHS. After the temple visit we drive a further 45 minutes to Sarai at Toria. Its 8 comfortable, traditional style bungalows are spread over farmland adjacent to the Ken River. The camp is owned and run by renowned Indian Conservation Biologist Dr Raghu Chundawat, the main protagonist in the BBC's *Tigers of the Emerald Forest* documentary on Panna, and Joanna Van Gruisen, his British wife, a wildlife photographer and writer.

Day 9

Panna National Park

This park, set in the rugged terrain of the Vindhya Hills, with the Ken River as its main water source, was created in 1981 and became part of Project Tiger in 1994. It has a core area of 543 sq. km and a buffer zone of 1002 sq. km. The main vegetation cover is Dry Deciduous forest and grassland, but there are many different micro habitats, especially near water or in deep ravines. Having been awarded a prestigious prize in 2007 for conservation by 2009 all its tigers had been systematically poached. A complete change in policy and of staff at the highest levels, and re-introduction from neighbouring Madhya Pradesh parks has, in a very short time, made Panna the 'model' and best example of successful tiger re-population in India. The Park's rugged and varied terrain means it also supports healthy populations of other predators such as: leopard, Indian wild dog, Indian wolf, striped hyena, caracal, and various small cat species; it also has a high number of sloth bear and more than 200 bird species.

Over the next two days we explore this extremely varied, wildlife-rich ecosystem on foot, by jeep, and on boats.

Morning & afternoon safaris to explore Panna's extensive territory, looking for wildlife with the help of local naturalists. 'Jungle activities' tend to take place early in the morning and later in the afternoon, when animals are more active (the park actually closes in the middle of the day). The rest of the time we shall be in camp, where walks, boat ride on the Ken River, or visits to local hamlets and farms are all on offer.

Day 10

AM Morning safari, our last to explore this lovely and varied park. **PM** Boat trip on the Ken River or village walk.

Day 11

Mid morning departure for Khajuraho Airport for flight to Varanasi (Benares). On arrival transfer to the Taj Group's Gateway Ganges Hotel for 2 nights. Late afternoon departure for the Ghats to view evening Aarti from the river.

Day 12

AM Today we rise early to experience a sunrise boat cruise along Varanasi's Ghats (Bathing places). This is one of India's archetypal spectacles, with tens of thousands of Hindu pilgrims and locals immersing themselves in the sacred river to wipe away the sins of the previous 7 incarnations. After breakfast back at our hotel we visit Sarnath (UNESCO World Heritage Site) and the ruins of the great Buddhist monastic and academic complex that existed for a thousand years until the 10th century. It is the site where Lord Buddha gave his first teaching to his disciples.

PM At leisure.

Day 13

AM Morning flight from Varanasi to Delhi, and back to The Imperial Hotel for lunch.

PM A free afternoon to relax, experience the hotel's wonderful spa, or do some last minute shopping at the nearby government emporium. Last trip dinner together.

Day 14

Transfers to Delhi International Airport for return flights back home.

