

**Reconnaissance trip to Gujarat, West India**  
**1<sup>st</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

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Thought you might like to read about my recent business trip to Gujarat.

Our original plan was to spend a couple of days in Rajasthan before taking an internal flight to Guwahati to explore the north-east, including Kaziranga and Nameri in Assam and five days at Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh. The latter was to involve camping in temperatures down to zero degrees. The prospect of seeing the recently named Bugun Liocichla, a new bird species discovered to science, made the thought of 'roughing it a bit' seem all worth while. Add to that being in the right habitat for Tragopans, Hoolock Gibbons and even Red Pandas and we were pretty excited about what the trip would have in store for us.

However, due to increasing tensions in Assam and advice on the FCO (Foreign and Common Wealth Office) website to avoid all but essential travel, we decided to change our plans. Instead we travelled to Gujarat in the very far west which boasts 1/3 of India's coastline.

We had booked our internal flights over the internet with Spicejet, a reputable and highly recommended airline. It was an easy process to log on and cancel our flights to the north-east (you need to do this at least 2 hours before the flight departure time), then book our flight to Ahmedabad in Gujarat, forfeiting a small administration fee and paying the difference in cost between the two flights.

Gujarat had always appealed to me. I'd wanted to see Asiatic Lions and Wild Ass for quite some time as well as experience the Gujarati hospitality. Also, another burning desire of mine was to visit the incredible Palitana Temple complex high up on the Shetrunjaya Hills.

As it was a business trip we packed things in and the pace was quite quick – too quick to do full justice to all of the areas we visited, but long enough to check out hotels and lodges, visit National Parks, experience some of the wildlife and see some monuments along the way.

Gujarat was all I was expecting it to be and so much more, so read on and find out all about it.

A sketch itinerary follows. For those of you who don't want to read the whole report, I've included a brief summary of the highlights at the beginning and the names of birds and other wildlife are shown in bold.

If you'd like any further information, then please call or email me and check out the website [www.wildaboutindia.com](http://www.wildaboutindia.com)

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### ***Itinerary in brief***

Day 1	Depart London Heathrow.
Day 2	Arrive Delhi - Bharatpur
Day 3	Bharatpur – Chambal – Agra - Bharatpur
Day 4	Bharatpur – Delhi (for internal flight) – Ahmedabad – Little Rann of Kutch
Day 5	Little Rann of Kutch
Day 6	Little Rann of Kutch – Jamnagar
Day 7	Jamnagar area inc. Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary and Narara
Day 8	Jamnagar – Diu visiting Somnath Temple on the way
Day 9	Diu
Day 10	Diu – Gir National Park
Day 11	Gir National Park
Day 12	Gir – Palitana
Day 13	Palitana – Velavadar Sanctuary – Ahmedabad
Day 14	Ahmedabad for internal flight back to Delhi
Day 15	Delhi for onward flight home.

### ***Highlights***

Over the two weeks and with limited time at several locations we saw 209 species of birds, 17 species of mammals and at least 7 species of reptiles.

With more time to devote to birdwatching in all the different areas, the bird list could have been substantially higher. Further information on species can be found in the accompanying checklist. It was a business trip and the pace was swift, so on several occasions I was unable to check out some species belonging to the difficult to identify groups e.g. some of the larks, pipits, warblers and distant terns.

**Bharatpur** – over 50 species in the 1 ½ hours spent in the Park, despite it being exceptionally dry at the moment. Best birds were **Dusky Eagle Owl, Indian Scops Owl and Spotted Owlets, Black-necked Stork.**

Having spent many days exploring Bharatpur in the past, this time it was just a fleeting visit. Four **Indian Python** in the grounds of the Maharaja's palace were a bonus.

**Chambal** – **Ganges River Dolphin** and amazing views of **Gharial** and **Marsh Mugger (crocodile).** Also **Bar-headed Geese, River Lapwing.**

**Agra** – **Taj Mahal.** My eighth visit and equally as stunning as the first time I saw this incredible architectural wonder.

**Little Rann of Kutch** – **Asiatic Wild Ass** and **100's of Common and Demoiselle Cranes, Common and Small Pratincole, flocks of Rosy Starling** and a fabulous stay in comfortable mud huts.

**Marine National Park, near Jamnagar** – **300+ Crab Plover, 100's Mudskippers, more Cranes, 130+ White Pelican, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Terek Sandpiper, Pufferfish and Sea Cucumber!**

**Diu** – A visit to **Somnath Temple** enroute to Diu was well worth it. The **estuarine and salt pan habitats looked interesting**, but we didn't have much time to explore. Also **wonderful beaches** pretty much deserted during the middle of the week, an impressive Fort, small Hindu place of worship dedicated to Lord Shiva tucked away in the rocks by the sea, peace and tranquillity and not forgetting chilled beer.

**Gir National Park** – A **Leopard and two Asiatic Lionesses** on safari, plus another **Leopard and Lioness** on a night drive. **Mottled Wood-owl, Painted Sandgrouse** and **Tawny-bellied Babbler** to name just a few of the birds. **Porcupines** eyes by torchlight! **Palitana** – a climb up 3500 steps was well worth the views across **hundreds of Jain temple turrets and to see the surrounding countryside with a surprising number of large lakes – the prospect of finding some good birds was definitely on the cards**, had we had spare time to explore. Spent the night at **Hotel Vijay Vilas Palace, previously a Maharaja's palace.**

**Velavadar** – Wonderful views of **Indian Grey Wolf**, hundreds of **Blackbuck** antelope, **Nilgai** and approx. **100+ Marsh Harrier, 20 Montagu's Harrier and 2 Pallid Harrier.**

A more detailed day by day account follows. Enjoy...

PS. I've spared you by leaving out the business bits.

### **Day 1      London Heathrow - Delhi**

Check-in for our British Airways flight was quick and easy. We used the online check-in via the BA website which allows you to select your seats and print off a boarding pass.

Thankfully we had travelled light and measured our hand baggage dimensions to ensure they were within the allowed size limits. Any liquids were carried in our suitcases to avoid unnecessary hassle at the security checks.

On this trip I had opted to try a relatively new Malaria preventative called Malarone, reported to have few side effects. Always check your personal medication requirements with your own GP. My doctor told me that Malarone has an excellent success rate for preventing the disease. The only downside was the price – approximately £60. That said, I slept much better and you start taking the tablets 1 – 2 days prior to departure and for only 7 days on your return.

Over the course of the 8 ½ hour flight an action-packed Bollywood romance movie kept me entertained as well as dipping into chapters in my Lonely Planet travel guide and field guides to the Birds of South Asia.

### **Day 2      Delhi – Bharatpur**

We arrived at Delhi International Airport on time around 04.55 hours (India is an extra 5 ½ hours ahead of the UK).

We could definitely see some benefits from this early arrival – due to fewer flights landing at this unearthly hour we breezed through passport control with minimum delay and retrieved our luggage very quickly.

And better still we avoided the Delhi rush hour traffic, so even with a stop it only took 3 ½ hours to reach Hotel Sunbird at Bharatpur. It was great to be enjoying a second breakfast by around 10.30!

Later that morning we had special dispensation to visit the grounds of the Maharaja's palace to look for **Indian Pythons**. The weather conditions were perfect, not boiling hot, but not too cold either. We were lucky enough to see four pythons, one of which must have been approximately three metres long. After a while, and in an orderly fashion, one by one they

slithered in to their porcupine burrow winter home. There was definitely a python 'pecking-order'. The largest python went down the right hand tunnel and it seemed like the smaller ones had little option but to use the tunnel to the left. When one of the small ones tried to head off to the right, it quickly seemed to do a U turn to join the others.

We also enjoyed a guided tour of the Palace by the Maharaja of Bharatpur himself. A huge stuffed Gaur (Wild Bison) literally filled one of the smaller rooms! There were approximately 30 Tiger and Leopard heads mounted onto wooden plaques – the majority had been shot in the local area around Bharatpur by the Maharaja's predecessors. Whilst this sight is quite distressing to a nature lover, one has to accept that it was more or less the norm several decades ago at a time when Tigers were more numerous.

After our tour of the palace we visited Jatouli School to deliver a £300 donation to be spent on improvements to the facilities for the children. The money had been raised by Isobel Norton and Mary Murdoch who visited the school in 2004 with their driver Suraj. They received such a warm welcome, that on their return to the UK they decided to raise some money to help the children. We left some laminated fact sheets to explain that Isobel and Mary wouldn't have visited their school, had it not been for the existence of Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary, in a way to link the donation to something positive that the park is bringing to them.

Towards the end of the afternoon we managed to squeeze in a brief visit to **Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary**, also known as Keoladeo National Park. Due to recent failed monsoons the Park was extremely dry, and huge rafts of waterbirds were sadly nowhere to be seen. Despite this, in only 1 ½ hours we saw over 50 species of birds. Highlights included **Sarus Crane, Black-necked Stork, Dusky Eagle Owl on the nest, Indian Scops Owl, Spotted Owlet, Great White Pelican, Small Minivet and Bluethroat**. We didn't have chance to explore the dry areas thoroughly or deviate far from the main route through the centre of the park. With more time available it is likely we would have seen **Indian Courser** and **Yellow-wattled Lapwing** in the dry areas to name just a couple of species. A few waterbirds congregated around tiny areas of water being pumped from deep under the ground. The Park has dried out like this on at least one occasion in the past, so let us keep our fingers crossed that the monsoon will help to rectify the situation, both for the Park and its wildlife and the local farming communities in the state of Rajasthan.

### **Day 3      Bharatpur – Chambal – Agra – Bharatpur**

Today was another busy day. We were up at 6am to see the Maharaja feed hundreds of Peacocks, with Grey Francolin (partridge) joining in the feeding frenzy. We also spotted some more **Indian Stone Curlew**.

From Bharatpur we drove to Chambal. The journey (3 hrs) takes you through rural Rajasthan farmland, the city of Agra and eventually we arrived to check out **Chambal Safari Lodge** and the **National Chambal Sanctuary**.

**Chambal Safari Lodge** is set in calm and peaceful surroundings. A colony of at least 40 **Fruit Bats, Brown Hawk Owl** and **Asian Koel** were all seen within the grounds.

We then drove the ½ hour to where the boat would take us along the **Chambal River**, a well-known haunt of the **Ganges River Dolphin, Gharial** (a rare thin snouted fish-eating crocodile) and **Indian Skimmer**. Boat trips are usually for a minimum of three hours, but our time was limited so we only went out for two hours. In two hours we had to choose between

looking for the Dolphins or travelling the opposite way along the river for the Skimmers. Dolphins won the toss, so in we got and off we went. It was the middle of the day, so a hat, suncream and plenty of water were all essential components in our daysacks. Incidentally, if you stay at Chambal you can book extra boat trips and even a camel safari if you so wish – sore backside comes as standard.

Our boat trip was not in vane, as we did manage to see the **Ganges River Dolphin** when it arched ½ way out of the water. As with the ocean going species, you had to be looking at the right patch of water at the right moment to avoid missing it! We also saw at least 30 **Gharial**, 2 **Marsh Mugger (crocodile)**, **Bar-headed Geese**, **Painted Storks** and many other species of birds. On the banks and islands turtles sunbathed.



Time was of the essence, so after a quick meal back at the Safari Lodge, we drove to Agra for a late afternoon visit to the **Taj Mahal**. Personally I prefer this time of day to any other when you can see the marble glisten and glint whiter than white in mid afternoon sun and gradually watch the colours turn more cream and peach as the sun begins to set.

We checked out a couple of hotels in Agra before our arrival back at Bharatpur at 9pm. All in all it was another wonderful but exhausting day, especially as we had missed the best part of a nights sleep on the plane journey.

#### **Day 4 Bharatpur – Delhi – Ahmedabad – Dasada (Little Rann of Kutch)**

Enjoyed a more leisurely start to the day and repacked our suitcases for our internal flight from Delhi to Ahmedabad, the home of Gandhi's ashram. **Top tip: Luggage allowance for an internal flight can be different to international flights, so think about this when you set out packing in the UK.**

Spicejet come highly recommended – quick check-in, polite staff and new plane. The 1 ½ hour flight departed on time and arrived a little earlier than scheduled. We acquired our luggage in 15 minutes! All for approximately £65 return.

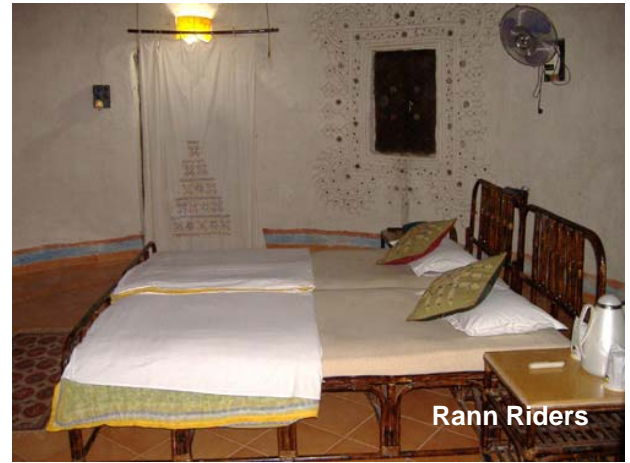
Our driver Ratan Singh was there to greet us with his spotless white Ambassador.

We got to know Ratan ever so well over the next week. He was always very polite and nothing was too much trouble. He took great pride in keeping his Ambassador spotless and most importantly keeping us safe on the roads! He was an excellent driver with impeccable reflexes to dodge the cows, dogs, pigs, people and crazy drivers in a multitude of vehicles.

He called the erratic drivers 'undisciplined', so he used this phrase quite often! It is always important to have faith in your driver as it makes for a more relaxing journey!

The journey from Ahmedabad to Dasada (Little Rann of Kutch) took approximately 2 ½ hours. The rural resort where we stayed was fabulous. After a warm welcome, we were shown to our mud hut to the night time melody of what sounded like cicadas. Several geckos peeped at us from around the outside door, though none made it inside – a shame really.

The inside of our mud hut was lovely with mirrored decorations in the walls and wicker furniture. Both the bedroom and bathroom were spotlessly clean.



It was pitch black with just a few small lights, so we didn't know what the grounds were like at all. That was a treat for the morning.

## Day 5      Little Rann of Kutch

Our mud huts were in well tended and pretty grounds. Within ½ hour of our 6am wake-up call we were enjoying breakfast. Our jeep safari into the **Little Rann of Kutch** started at 7am and was to last approximately four hours.

We had a drive through rural countryside and small villages to reach the more 'wild' National Park habitat, the home of **Asiatic Wild Ass** and **Macqueen's Bustard** to name just a couple of species.



The short journey gave us a brief insight into village life and the true friendliness of the Gujarati people. Life in the heart of the Rann, a vast salt plain, desert-like habitat looked tough. It was hard to see how animals and people alike could eke out an existence in this rather harsh environment which would get much hotter and drier prior to the monsoon.

Seeing **Asiatic Wild Ass** proved to be easy. We saw many from our jeep. However, **Maqueen's Bustard** proved elusive for us. Perhaps with more time to explore the habitat we might have found luck with this species.

Also it was a treat to come across hundreds of **Common and Demoiselle Cranes** as well as **Rosy Starling** and many other species around the villages. Two **Red-headed Falcon** were also a welcome addition to the trip list and a wetland was packed full of waterbirds. **Purple Swamphen, 25+ Small Pratincole** and **6 Collared Pratincole** were a pleasure to watch. At various locations we saw **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** and at least **100 Little Green Bee-eaters**



In between safaris one could choose to relax at Rann Riders resort or venture across the road to a small wetland with some extensive dry areas round about. Here I saw **Wire-tailed Swallow** and close views of three Sarus Cranes and Ashy-crowned Finch-lark.

With more time to spare it would have been worth visiting the main wetland and surrounding dry areas again and at dusk to witness the flocks of Cranes coming in to roost and look for **Syke's Nightjar**.

## Day 6 Little Rann of Kutch – Jamnagar

It was our last opportunity to have a safari here, so we set off a little earlier in the hope of seeing the Cranes before they left their evening roost site. Sadly, we were not quite early enough. As first light dawned and we neared the wetland, we saw at least **200 Demoiselle Cranes** fly over head.

You could easily spend two full days or more exploring the local area. Sadly, we had to move on after less than a day and a half. The journey of about five hours to our next destination took us to Jamnagar where we stayed in a pleasant modern hotel. We arrived just after dark, so there was no time to birdwatch.



Flock of Common Cranes



Sunrise at Little Rann of Kutch

## Day 7 Marine Nature Reserve, Jamnagar area

Yet another early start (06.30am) to reach **Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary** by the Gulf of Kutch for 07.30am. The bird sanctuary has 252 species of birds recorded within its' 6.4 km<sup>2</sup> boundary.

It was easy to see how the site has a healthy bird list. There was plenty to see on the estuary and saltpan habitat on one side of the access road and on the extensive freshwater marsh and lake on the other. The latter was far more extensive than one initially realises, as we found out when we visited the watch tower. The majority of the huge lake and marsh was hidden behind a bank of trees and shrubs.

It was a misty morning and on our drive down to the Bird Sanctuary we stopped to take in around **300 Demoiselle Cranes** feeding in a nearby field. Our guide for the morning worked for the Forest Department and told us that you can see up to **40,000 Cranes** coming in to roost (September/October time), with the numbers tailing off towards the end of the winter.

We were told that **Indian Skimmers** roost at the sanctuary, but during the day they usually head out across the estuary to feed in coastal waters and around the many small islands within the Marine National Park.

With our time limitations we were only able to visit this one morning. I'd recommend a visit at dawn and dusk if possible, especially if you haven't seen Bharatpur at its best. The only



disadvantage is that there isn't much shade, so take a sun hat and plenty of water if you plan to stay there in the middle of the day. In February dawn is around 6am and dusk around 6pm.

On the estuary side (above left) the mud/silt habitat was alive with hundreds of **Mudskippers**. The small shrubs growing there included three species of **Mangrove**. **Gull-billed Tern, Slender-billed Gull and Greater Flamingo** were seen on the estuary. I failed to check the **Little Terns** for any signs of **Saunders Tern** which you can see in the area. On the freshwater marsh we had fleeting views of a **Brown Crake** as well as approximately **135 Great White Pelican, Black-necked Grebe, Painted Stork, Eurasian Spoonbill, Comb Duck, Temminck's Stint** and many other wetland species.



The mist eventually lifted around 10am and temperatures quickly started to soar. Sadly we had to leave around 11am to collect our permits and a different guide to visit **Narara**, part of the Marine National Park further along the coast.

**Narara** was approximately 1 hours drive from Jamnagar and 1 ½ hours from our hotel. A visit should be timed with the high tide to make the most of the experience.

We ventured out across a bed of dead coral covered in sticky estuarine mud and silts. We were told that silt from local cement factories, and I'm sure other factors, had contributed to the demise of large expanses of coral close in to the shore. With the tide racing in, a bit like Morecambe Bay, it was too dangerous to reach the edge of the live coral further out.

For this reason and to avoid cutting yourselves on sharp coral and ruining your footwear, I would recommend observing the passage of waders and terns from the road.



Sea Cucumber, Narara



Puffer fish, Narara

It was here I had my birding highlight of the whole trip – an estimated **300+ Crab Plover**. Also **100's of Lesser Sandplover** were constantly on the move, being pushed on by the incoming tide. **Terek Sandpiper**, **Great Black-headed Gull** and **Caspian Tern** were all welcome additions to the list.

We didn't have time to check out the extensive saltpan areas along the last few kilometres of the drive – I'm sure this would have added a few extra species of wader to the list.

Top tips for here would be to arrive a few hours before high tide. This would allow time to check the salt pans and muddy beaches in advance of the incoming tide and would ensure that you are in the best spot to view the waders (at the end of the road) on the high tide. **DON'T** be tempted to trek across the coral. It is potentially dangerous, especially without a guide who knows what they are doing, and you'll really mess up your boots. There is no shade, so again definitely take a hat and sun lotion, plus lots of water if the tide dictates that you are there in the heat of the midday sun. Take a packed lunch or snack as you cannot buy food or drink nearby.

## **Day 8 Jamnagar – Diu Island (via Somnath Temple)**

Most of the day was spent driving to Diu at the southern most tip of Gujarat. Enroute we had a welcome break for something to eat and to visit Somnath Temple. It is said that the Temple was witness to the creation of the universe.

We drove the 'cross country' way as we had thought about visiting Junagadh, but time wasn't on our side, so we went straight to Somnath Temple instead. In hindsight, we might have enjoyed a drive along the coastal roads - who knows!

For those interested in birds and not architecture, you can skip this and the next few paragraphs. Our visit to Somnath was well worthwhile. The current temple was built in 1950 to traditional designs on the original site by the sea. The temple has been razed and rebuilt several times in its extensive history. Originally it is said that Somraj the moon god constructed it in gold, then Ravana in silver, Krishna in wood and Bhimdev in stone. At one time the temple was so wealthy there were 800 musicians and dancing girls there.

Despite its relatively recent rebuild in 1950, there is a feeling of age about the place and a visit there is a humbling experience. As it contains one of 12 sacred Shiva shrines, thousands upon thousands of Hindu pilgrims visit each year, many kissing the worn marble

steps as they enter. Several hundred people passed through in the short time we were there, bringing their donations which many looked like they could hardly afford to give.

You are not allowed to wear shoes or take in camera's, mobile phones, binoculars, bags and sharp objects etc, so we left our belongings in the capable hands of Ratan, our driver. There is a 'shoe deposit' area near the entrance.

The drive from Somnath to Diu took approximately 1 ½ hours. We arrived at the hotel late in the afternoon and watched numerous **Crested Treeswifts** hawking for insects over our heads.

## **Day 9**      **Diu Island**

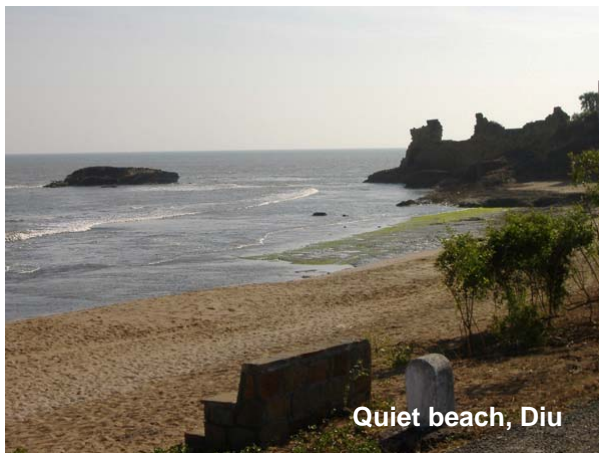
Diu is an interesting place. Previously a Portuguese Colony, for a time it was governed from Goa, but now by the Union Territory of Daman and Diu, overseen by Delhi.

The 11 x 3 km island is separated from the mainland by a narrow channel. On the northern side of the island is tidal marsh and salt pans, whilst the south is very different with very pleasant and sheltered sandy beaches and rocky outcrops. Whilst neither of us sat on a beach, most of the beaches we came across were deserted for the best part of their length.

Whilst Diu was definitely the most touristy place we stayed at in Gujarat, we still didn't see many western tourists AND we couldn't find any decent postcards to purchase anywhere! Now there is a money-making venture for someone!

The relaxed atmosphere and relatively quiet roads was a real tonic. Another big positive is that you can purchase and drink alcohol here – alcohol is prohibited in Gujarat unless you get a one-week permit which is available from some of the larger hotels with an alcohol shop. We were advised to stay clear of weekends, when large numbers of people can descend on Diu and it loses some of its tranquil feel.

Whilst the rooms at Hotel Hoka (Nagoa beach) were not luxurious, they were very clean and comfortable and the food was delicious – the restaurant was packed at meal times. In late afternoon I went out to explore the other side of the island. The most inspiring man-made feature was an impressive old fort. We also visited a Christian Church and there are at least two museums, including one with an amazing collection of shells.



## **Day 10      Diu Island – Gir National Park (Sasan Gir)**

We had promised ourselves a sleep-in, so we left our hotel at about 9am. It broke my heart to have to drive past **extensive salt pans and mud flats** as we crossed the causeway to the mainland and Una – served me right for having a sleep-in. However, we didn't want to delay the journey too much, just in case we missed our afternoon safari planned at Gir National Park, the only place in the world to see Asiatic Lion and reputed to have the highest concentration of top carnivores in India, but sadly no Tigers.

The journey to Gir took approximately three hours. On the way we stopped at a rural syrup making factory. It was fascinating to see the juice being extracted from the sugar cane and the processes it went through prior to syrup being scraped into tins for sale.

Our driver also detoured very slightly to show us a roost of approximately 2000 **Fruitbats** – always a pleasure to see.

As it happened we arrived in plenty of time at Gir Birding Lodge, located next to one of the park entrance gates. After a tour of the main building and lunch, we had a short time to relax before our first safari.

The National Park covers 258 km<sup>2</sup> and a further 1153 km<sup>2</sup> is dedicated Sanctuary, so we had plenty of ground to cover. Our safari was in an open-backed jeep (as is the case in the Tiger reserves of North and Central India) and we were accompanied by a Forest Department guide as well as Ganesh, our own excellent guide from Gir Birding Lodge. It wasn't long before we were driving through the dry semi-arid deciduous forests of **Teak, Kadayo (also known as the Gum or Ghost Tree), Flame of the Forest and Silk Cotton tree** to name just a few of the species. The beautiful red flowers on of the latter two species helped to brighten up the dry forests.

Within about 15 minutes there was intense excitement, when **Chital (Spotted Deer)** started to call in alarm from very closeby – a sure sign that a predator was around. I was shocked as our Park guide got out of the jeep and walked into the forest - something that wouldn't happen in a Tiger Sanctuary! Within a few minutes he'd seen something and quickly rushed back to the jeep. We drove a few metres further on and in the shade of a Banyan tree approximately 70 metres from the jeep, there was a **Leopard** crouched and looking straight at us! By the size of its head our guide thought it was a male.

This was a very special moment for me, as I'd longed to see Leopard in its 'natural' environment. Many years ago I saw a distant view of one cross a road in the headlights of our car in an urban setting, but it wasn't quite the same.

I was so excited that I didn't even think about taking a photograph – I just savoured the moment. It sat for two or three minutes before turning round so you could see its side profile, before disappearing behind undergrowth. Wow!

This was a fantastic start to our stay at Gir. As we drove on we saw **Sambar Deer, Common Langur, eight Grey Mongoose, Wild Boar, Golden Jackal, Marsh Crocodile and Nilgai**.

We saw plenty of good birds too, including Woolly-necked Storks, Short-toed and Crested Serpent Eagles, White-eyed Buzzard, River Tern and the rather brightly coloured Plum-headed Parakeet and Yellow-footed Green-pigeon.

We returned to our accommodation three hours later feeling totally elated to enjoy some more western-style food to the night sounds of more cicadas/crickets and some very loud Chital alarm calls coming from near the perimeter wall.

Later that evening we went on a night drive, ably driven around village tracks in our Ambassador with Ganesh our guide and Ismile our chef. Ismile had lived locally from childhood and knew the back-roads and local villages very well.

Nightjars, some of the lesser cats and porcupine were all possible, but to our amazement the first set of eyes we spotted in the beam of our high-powered torches belonged to another **Leopard**.

About an hour later we noticed some local people stood around on a rural track. To our excitement, they had just seen a Lioness near the carcass of a cow. The local people were guarding the carcass to ensure the lions didn't drag it away, as they needed proof of the kill for the local authorities in order to claim compensation.

In the far distance of our torch beam, we could make out the carcass. Shortly after arriving there was excitement among the local people. A **Lioness** was seen about 70 metres from the track, but sadly for me, I could only see two red eyes and nothing much of an outline.

What amazed me was the total lack of concern by local people about being attacked by any of these big cats. In total darkness the locals followed the lioness into the scrubland. Apparently Asiatic Lions are much more placid than their African cousins – that said I'd advise against this laid back approach, just to be on the safe side.

### **Day 11      Gir National Park (Sasan Gir)**

Another morning dawned and we couldn't wait to head back into the park. From memory the morning safari was from about 07.00 – 11.00 hours and afternoon from about 15.00 – 18.00 hrs.

We were still keen to get a better view of the Asiatic Lion and we were not disappointed. Part way through our morning drive we stopped near a Forestry Department building in the heart of the Park. Over the boundary wall about 80 metres away were **two lions, a female and fully grown youngster**. We watched as they lay in the sun, occasionally lifting their heads. One stood up and stretched before lying back down again.



Asiatic Lion



Painted Sandgrouse

Ganesh our guide told us that that it was the mating season for lions. Females keep their cubs away from the males and cubs can stay with their mothers for up to 28 months. Ganesh was also a fountain of knowledge on trees – the **Banyan** (or walking tree as it is often known) is a holy tree in Hindu religion, as is the **People Tree** which looked like it was related to our Aspen. The fruits of the **Indian Gooseberry Tree** are made into pickle and used in medicine and local people collect cotton from the **Silk Cotton Tree** after it flowers.

The birds spotted included a male **Paradise Flycatcher**, **Dusky Crag Martin**, **Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** and **Yellow-throated Sparrow**.

Returning to **Gir Birding Lodge** in the heat of the day allowed for a couple of hours to relax, catch up with notes and wander round the grounds and local environs of Gir Birding Lodge. In the garden one can find Mango, Lemon, Guava, Kiwi and Custard Apple trees.

In the afternoon we didn't add any new species of mammals, but saw plenty more **Langur**, **Nilgai** etc and a **Monitor Lizard**. The highlight of this safari for me was a **Mottled Wood-owl** sitting on a nest (a new species for me) and good views of **Painted Sandgrouse**. I couldn't remember seeing **Tawny-bellied Babbler** before either, though from the distribution maps it looks to be a wide-spread species. We also visited the nest site of a **Pallid Scops-Owl**, (a different species to Indian Scops-owl), but there was no sign of the adults.

Our social history lesson was fascinating. We heard how Gir is home to the Maldharis people who have been an integral part of the Gir ecosystem for many generations. They live in small settlements called 'nesses' and amongst other things, make a living from their cattle which they tend around the clock. Over the years the population of Maldharis and their cattle grew till it was having a negative impact on the Park and the wild ungulates (Chital etc) started to decline. Conflicts between man and lion started to increase as it became easier for the lions to kill domestic cattle with the decline in Chital, Nilgai etc.

Park management has turned things around. The population of Asiatic Lions has almost doubled in 40 years to an estimated 359 (2005). Leopard increased from an estimated 142 in 1974 to 311 in 2000 and the estimated Chital population has increased from 4517 in 1974 to 49,965 in 2005.

Many of the Maldhari people and their cattle were resettled in areas outside of the core part of the National Park and now there is a system of compensation if lions kill domestic stock.

Our stay at Gir was fabulous and we learnt so much from our guide Ganesh about the local area and its people.

## **Day 12          Gir National Park (Sasan Gir) - Palitana**

The Orientation Centre (some guides call it the museum) at Sasan is worth a visit. I'd suggest allowing at least half an hour in between safari's. There is also an Interpretation Zone at Devalia which has a 4 km<sup>2</sup> enclosure with a few lions in it and other mammals, pretty much guaranteeing a sighting, but in a safari park kind of setup. As time was limited and we had seen 'wild' lions in the National Park we decided not to visit the Interpretation Zone.

We left Gir Birding Lodge around 8.30 for a 4 ½ hour drive to Palitana, to visit the 863 Jain temples at the top of the Shetrunjaya Hills. Checking in at Hotel Vijay Vilas Palace was a delight. In an ideal world we would have had at least two nights here to give us more time to enjoy the palace, embark on a dawn ascent to the Temples and explore many more temples in Palitana town and local wetlands.

Whilst not ideal, we planned to start our climb up the 3,500 at 2pm to reach the top towards the end of the day when temperatures started to drop. The heat still made our climb extra tiring and once we reached the top we didn't have enough time to fully enjoy the temples before we were being ushered back down. It was interesting to know that no one is allowed to sleep overnight because the place is reserved as an abode for the Gods.

The views from the top across the temples and surrounding countryside were amazing, with far more wetlands than we had imagined.



A key tip here is to take plenty of bottled water. The Lonely Planet guide states the opposite, but I couldn't see anywhere to buy bottled water at the top, so I'd definitely take some. Leave leather bags, belts and unnecessary bags – the Jains love animals so leather items around the temples are not the done thing. Allow at least five hours and perhaps six or more (especially if you think you will be slow on the ascent) to give you enough time to relax at the top and visit some of the temples and generally admire the beauty and splendour of the place along with the wonderful views.

On reaching the bottom and main entrance (we had climbed up the back route from our hotel) it was interesting to see a Jain ceremony taking place in one of the temples – lots of colour, with flowers, candles and chanting – all very atmospheric.

On the floor at the main entrance as an expression of warm hospitality a huge *rangoli*, a beautiful work of art made from bright powders, brightened the route for pilgrims.

We were literally the last tourists to come down from the temples, so we didn't really see how busy it could get earlier on in the day. As we reached our car we noticed at least a hundred people chariots (a seat on two poles carried by four persons, one on each end of the poles) propped up against the walls. At the time we wondered how many of these 'chariots' would be used at any one time and felt that many would remain underutilised. However the next morning demonstrated that there would be a huge demand for these forms of carriage.

Palitana and its temples are considered by many Jains to be more important than the temple covered hills of Jharkhand, Mount Abu and Girnar. It is believed that every Jain should visit Palitana at least once in his/her lifetime to get "Bhavya" status (fit to attain nirvan or salvation). The lengths that people went to in order to visit the temples was quite extraordinary, as we saw the next morning.

By the time we arrived back at Vijay Vilas Palace we were exhausted. A lovely shower and delicious food served in a dining room literally fit for a Maharaja made us feel much better. Then it was to bed early so we could be up before dawn the next morning.

### **Day 13 Palitana – Velavadar – Ahmedabad**

It was with regret that we left our palace at 6am after such a short stay. The journey to Velavadar took approximately 1 ½ hours.

It was still quite dark as we drove away from Palitana. In the head lights we kept seeing small groups of people (more than a hundred in total) dressed in white, many with nothing on their feet, clearly on a pilgrimage to the temples. What was more incredible was that at least 20 of them were in wheelchairs, clearly too ill or frail to walk. Even 40 km from Palitana we saw pilgrims on their journey. What amazing dedication and yet another experience that I'll never forget. It was now evident that the people chariots would come in extremely useful for the elderly and the ill as well as perhaps the people who had walked for hours, if not days just to reach the bottom of the hill.

We arrived at Velavadar as planned around 7.30am to make the most of the cooler start to the day and increase our chance of seeing Indian Grey Wolf.

Extensive grasslands stretching between two seasonal rivers at **Velavadar National Park** attract some good birds and mammals. The location is famous for **Blackbuck** (estimated population of 3,500), undoubtedly India's prettiest of the antelopes and for birdwatchers the impressive **harrier roost** in the late afternoons can be an **amazing sight with numbers ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand**.





Blackbuck (painted tiles), Velavadar

Our guide told us that there were 19 **Indian Grey Wolf** in the park and that it's hard to see them. Sadly one had just crossed the main track near the Information Centre just ½ an hour before we arrived – typical! At least this gave us a clue as to where to start looking. As we bumped along a track in the direction where the wolf had headed we noticed lots of birds of prey (mainly harriers) circling and sitting on the ground and in bushes close to a patch of tall grass. To us it seemed obvious that there was some carrion attracting them, and as the wolf had wandered that way, we figured the wolf might be close by too. So as you could imagine, we were all quite happy to sit it out and hope that our patience would be rewarded with a good view of this rare predator. But to our annoyance the Forest Department guide wanted us to move on. After 15 or so minutes we had to make a move and we did so thinking that we'd left behind our best chance of seeing this illusive species.

Thankfully, we were rewarded with **excellent views of a different wolf** in another part of the park. The Forest Department guide saw it first (so he was forgiven) as it briskly walked through the tall grass. Initially all you could see were its ears and back until it came out into a more open area and crossed the track approximately 200m away from us – it was another one of those 'wow' moments for me and well worth getting up early for.

Clearly wolves in India are not popular or welcome by people in a similar way to their European counterparts – evident when locals threw a stick in its direction. The wolf passed them by without even stopping to look at them or deviating from its route - clearly a top dog with attitude.

Within about ½ hour of seeing the wolf we stopped to check out a species of chat, which proved to be **Stoliczka's Bushchat, now called White-browed Bushchat**. It is another well sought-after species with Conservation Status as vulnerable.

We couldn't stay for the roost, but despite this we saw plenty of **Marsh** and **Montagu's Harriers** as well as a couple of **Pallid Harrier**.

All in all the morning was very productive and we were extremely happy as we drove back to Ahmedabad to spend the night prior to us catching our early morning internal flight back to Delhi.

**Day 14**      **Ahmedabad - Delhi**

Today was a day for rounding off our trip. The Spicejet internal flight back to Delhi was a good opportunity to update notes and checklists. A few hours to explore the Central Cottage Industries Emporium in Delhi provides an opportunity to marvel at various handicrafts from all over India – inlaid marble, silver, jewellery, carvings, silk paintings, fabrics and much, much more – all very tempting but remind yourself of your baggage allowance!

We had a welcome few hours to relax at the Heritage Inn, Delhi - a wonderful property with exquisite furnishing and very personable owners and helpful staff.

Then around midnight our driver took us to Indira Gandhi International Airport for our return flight home.

Definitely Gujarat is a must for birdwatchers, wildlife enthusiasts and photographers whilst offering cultural delights, awesome temples and quiet secluded beaches.

As ever – such a fabulous trip with fabulous wildlife and wonderful hospitality. Special thanks to my travelling companion Charron Pugsley-Hill, staff at Hotel Sunbird (Bharatpur), Chambal Safari Lodge, Rann Riders, Gir Birding Lodge, Vijay Vilas Palace and Heritage Inn. Also my sincere gratitude to Mustak Mepani for his advice, to our nature guide Ganesh Adhikari for sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm of birds and wildlife and last but not least to Ratan Singh our driver for steering round the obstacles and making our journey so pleasant. Back home I'd like to thank Keith Barnes for allowing me to use some of his bird photographs to brighten up this report.

Finally thank you India for yet another amazing experience!

Jo Thomas

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PS. If you have been to Gujarat and you have experience of different areas I'd be interested to hear from you. We didn't have time to visit the Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, a 116 km<sup>2</sup> lake some 60km south west of Ahmedabad, which had attracted over 250 species of birds. If anyone has visited, I'd be interested to hear about their experiences there.