

No 6 Ranthambore National Park to Agra

Back down to earth the following day and off on the coach for a 180km, four hour, drive south east of Jaipur to the Ranthambore National Park where tigers are protected. The landscape we travelled through was more fertile than the desert areas of Rajasthan and the farms were all a little larger. They were growing large areas of mustard plants - they mostly use the seed for oil rather than to make mustard itself. Not only is mustard oil the main cooking oil in India, it is also burnt in oil lamps in summer to repel mosquitoes. Other crops included potatoes, tomatoes, chillies and onions.



A camel cart in rural India



A local shepherdess with some sheep

Ranthambore is apparently the best place for a likely tiger sighting in the whole of India. The 1334 square kilometre park was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1955, although strangely, Maharajahs were allowed to continue shooting game in there until 1970! The park is divided into 5 areas and each of these has a number of 'drives'. Each area is limited to 15 canters (open topped vehicles seating 20) and 15 jeeps for each safari session. Safaris leave at 7.00am and 3.00pm and last three hours. We did one in Area 1 the afternoon we arrived and two on the second day in Area 2. We saw all sorts of wildlife, including sambar deer and spotted deer, monkeys, peacocks free ranging, antelopes and lots of different sorts of birds. Sadly not the elusive tiger, although we did find a fresh pug mark. The resort we stayed at was very relaxing and incredibly quiet just like the desert camp of the previous week.



In the open top Canter with the local guide



A spotted deer



Sambar deer



Deer with egret on its back



Ducks



The fresh tiger pug mark



Some of the wildlife – monkeys at the entry gate, more deer, birds – no tigers!

We had to get up rather early the next day because the tour was taking us on a 2.5 hour train trip towards Agra in order to avoid a 4.5 hour drive on a bumpy and narrow road. Our bus set off the night before so that it could get there in time to pick us up at our train destination. Our train left at 7.05am and we had to catch that one as the next one would be too late for us to do a fullish day of sightseeing before getting to Agra. We had reserved seats in a carriage which seated 70+ in rows of 3 seats on one side and 2 on the other. It was a very long train with about twenty carriages. It was a very smooth ride as the rails are continuously welded rather than having expansion joints like ours, so no familiar 'clicky-clack' noise.



Here comes the train – no-one riding on top of this one!

The ticket inspector

We were heading east towards the border of Rajasthan and the farmland out the window was even better than before with plenty more mustard and tomatoes being grown. The ticket inspector when he came had a huge roll of computer print out to find our names and check us off. Our guide said that they are very strict about viewing original ID for each passenger, although they didn't seem to bother with us. The locals are all very friendly and want to talk, ask where we are from, commiserate about the cricket - they know all about our scores too as well as their current series against England! They all knew Ponting was retiring. Often we find them secretly taking photos of our group in our western outfits and looking terribly European, in the same way we are quickly snatching shots of sari clad beauties or exotic turbans!

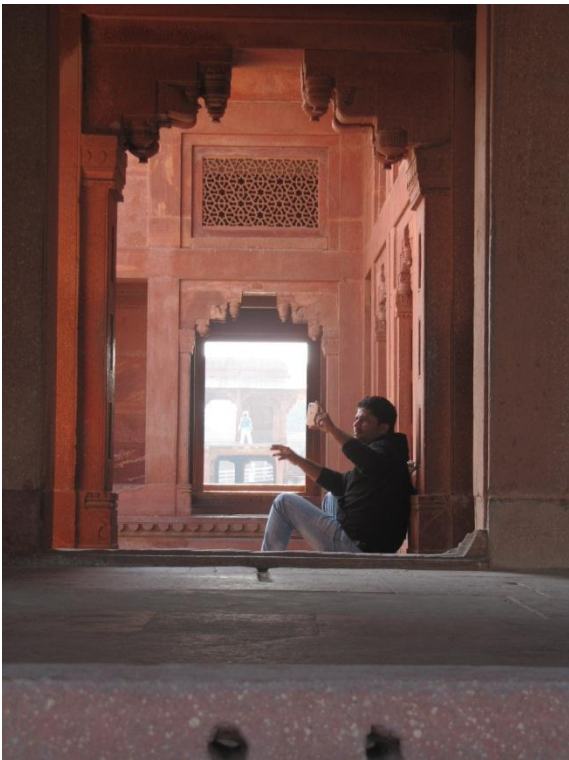


An Indian family wanting to have their photo taken with the foreign lady!

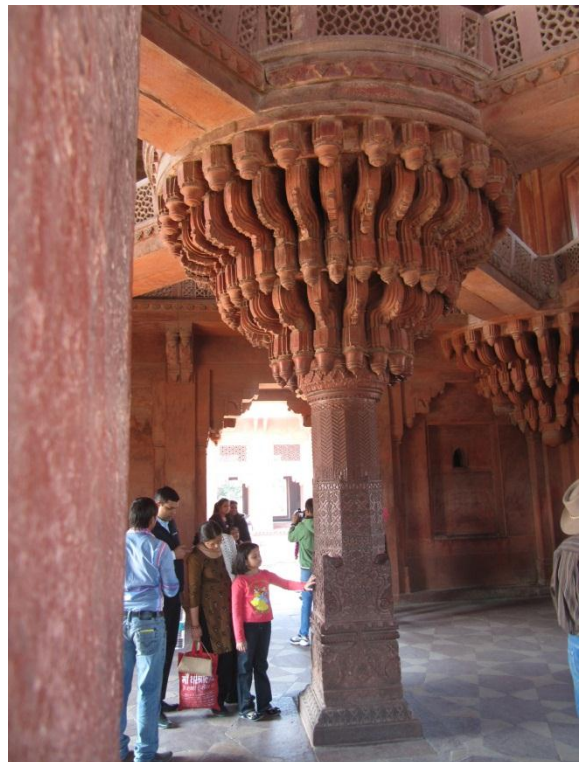


Indian train stations are crowded, as are their trains.

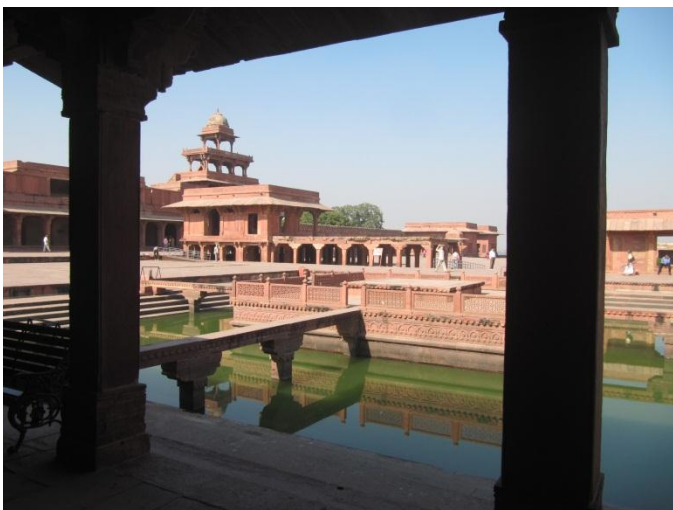
We arrived in Bharatpur and reboarded our coach and headed for the deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri. This city was built by the Emperor Akbah in 1571-1585. Unfortunately a long term drought shortly afterwards left the town with insufficient water and it was abandoned after only a few years. The buildings are still very complete, not in ruins, and surprisingly the stones haven't been robbed away by later generations and used for other buildings. After an hour of looking around we headed east for a further 40km to Agra



An Indian tourist taking a photo with his iPhone



Carved columns in the audience hall



Some of the palace buildings

