TOUR CODE

IA8

ADVENTURESABROAD

INDIA

Eastern Himalaya & Classic North

21 days

Updated 30/09/2013

Day 1 ***Arrival in Calcutta***

Today we arrive in Calcutta.

Overnight in Calcutta. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 ***Calcutta - Darjeeling***

We fly to the market town of Siliguri (Bagdogra Airport) in North Bengal and then start our 3 hour drive from the plains to Darjeeling along a road that soon leaves the rice fields and coconut palms of the lowlands for the tea plantations of the lower hills. Driving close beside the narrow gauge Darjeeling Hill Railway drawn by century old steam engines, we reach the halfway point of Kurseong where we stop for a tea break before driving to Ghoom at about 2400m / 8,000 ft There is a 350m / 1,000 ft descent into the busy town of Darjeeling.

Darjeeling or 'the place of the thunderbolt' and the surrounding area once belonged to the rulers of Sikkim. In 1833 the British gained control of the hill on which Darjeeling stands after considerable political maneuvering in return for a small annual payment to the King of Sikkim. It soon grew to a popular health resort after a pony road and some houses were built and tea growing introduced. Later in the 19th century, the remarkable mountain railway from the plains was built and Darjeeling boomed as a resort and holiday destination for the British bureaucracy wanting an escape to cooler climates.

Built on a crescent shaped ridge, Darjeeling (2134m / 7,042 ft) faces the Himalayan peaks and is surrounded by cultivated slopes, thick forests and tea plantations.

Overnight in Darjeeling. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 ***Darjeeling: Everest Sunrise & Ghoom Monastery***

We are woken before dawn with a cup of tea before boarding Land Rovers for the 15 km drive to Tiger Hill to see the amazing colours of sunrise on Kanchenjunga. At 2550 m / 8,500 ft, Tiger Hill commands superb views of the mountains and valleys of the eastern Himalaya with Everest, Lhotse and Makalu visible in the far distance on clear days. We stop at Ghoom monastery on the way back; this monastery built in 1875 belongs to the yellow hat (Gelugpa) sect lamas and has a 5-metre high statue of the Maitreyi (future) Buddha.

In the afternoon, we will tour the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute and the small zoo beside it has several interesting Himalayan species. The institute itself houses a considerable collection of items used by the early Everest explorers and also has a fine topographical model of the Eastern Himalaya. Later we drive to a nearby tea plantation for which this region is famous and see the picking and processing of tea leaves. Sometime during the day, we will make a quick visit the Tibetan Refugee and Handicraft Centre where Tibetan refugees live cooperatively and their children attend school while their parents work on wool making, carpet weaving and handicraft production.

The rest of the day is free to browse the 'Chowrasta' or town square and explore the well-known Oxford Book Shop with its excellent collection of books on the history and cultures of the Himalaya. You could also walk down to the Lower Bazaar where the local residents shop for produce, fabrics and spices.

Overnight in Darjeeling. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Darjeeling - Gangtok (Sikkim)*

We have an early departure for our steep descent through a series of tea plantations to the tropical Teesta Valley. Passing through sal forests and cinchona (quinine bark) plantations, we stop briefly at the Teesta Bridge checkpoint to show our Sikkim entry documents before continuing onwards to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim.

Located in the Eastern Himalaya, Sikkim forms a natural border between Nepal to the west and Bhutan to the east. To the north lies Tibet and to the south the Teesta and Ringgit rivers form a natural boundary with the Indian state of West Bengal; to the east lies the Kingdom of Bhutan separated by a tongue of Chinese controlled Tibet.

The climate is subtropical in the lower valleys, but changing fast to temperate and alpine with increase in elevation. Vast rhododendron forests cover most of the slopes between 3300-4000 m (10,800-13,000 feet) and the Himalayan cypress is widely found near the tree line. Mixed forests of bamboo and dozens of orchid species are common between 1500-3000 m (5,000-9,850 feet) -- 660 varieties of orchids are known to grow in Sikkim. The cardamom spice is a cash crop that grows wild extensively around Yuksum and Phodang.

Later today we will visit the Institute of Cottage Industries where young Sikkimese people are taught traditional crafts. There is a sales centre attached for a number of local handicrafts, most with a strong Tibetan look to them. Woollen carpets, shawls and traditionally painted tables are good buys, all at government regulated prices.

Overnight in Gangtok. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Gangtok: Area Tour - Kalimpong*

A brief drive to Rumtek Monastery on the opposite side of the valley from Gangtok. Rumtek is the seat of the Tibetan Kagyugpa sect of monks and a major centre for Tibetan religious studies. The 16th Gwalpa Karmapa, the head of the Kagyugpa sect, took refuge in Rumtek after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950's; he and his followers escaped with whatever statues, 'thangka' paintings and scriptures they could and built Rumtek monastery as a replica of the Chhofuk monastery that they had left behind in Tibet.

A scenic drive past forest covered slopes and fast flowing rivers to Kalimpong (1250 m / 4,100 feet), an important market town located strategically at the crossroads of Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Bengal until the 1960s when the Indo-China war put an end to cross border trade. It is now well known for its numerous flower and orchid nurseries.

We stay in the Himalayan Hotel, run by Tim MacDonald, grandson of the Tibetan explorer David MacDonald, who accompanied many of the early British Younghusband expeditions to Tibet around the turn of the century. The MacDonald family home is something of a museum to the early exploration of this part of the Himalaya; its 16 rooms decorated with memorabilia donated by notable Himalayan explorers who have stayed at the hotel over the years. The main house was built in the 1920s and has a mature garden with dozens of varieties of flowering trees and shrubs and views of the Himalaya from the verandahs.

Overnight in Kalimpong (1247 m / 4,100 ft). Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Kalimpong: Area Tour - Siliguri*

Today we historic home of Dr Graham and the extensive boarding and day school facilitiy that was established over a century ago. We will see its classrooms and boarding houses to get an idea how students of both sexes from all over India and neighbouring countries like Bhutan spend their days during the study year. There is an Anglican church with fine stained glass windows nearby, and you can also visit one of the flower nurseries for which Kalimpong is well known across India.

Late afternoon, we descend to the Teesta River Valley and drive to the important market town of Siliguri and onwards to our hotel located on the northern outskirts of town.

Overnight in Siliguri. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Siliguri - Bagdogra - Delhi*

Today we drive down to the plains of North Bengal and the airport of Bagdogra from where we fly to Delhi.

The name Delhi, Dehali or Dilli is derived form Dhillika, the name of the first medieval township of Delhi, located on the southwestern border of the present Union Territory of Delhi, in Mehrauli. This was the first in the series of seven medieval cities, also known as Yoginipura, the Fortress of the Yoginis (female divinities).

Overnight in Delhi. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Delhi: City Tour*

Today we have a full-day tour of Delhi. We start with a drive north into Old Delhi, passing along the Rajpath (King's Way) and stopping for photos at the India Gate. The 42m high India Gate, an "Arc de Triomphe"-like archway in the middle of a crossroad, commemorates the Indian soldiers who lost their lives fighting for the British Army during WWI. This landmark also bears the names of British and Indian soldiers killed in the Northwestern frontier in the Afghan War of 1919.

Next we will make a visit to the Jamma Mosque. Located in the heart of Old Delhi, the largest mosque in India can accommodate as many as twenty-thousand worshippers. This imposing architectural monument, with it's three gateways and two minarets, took fourteen years to complete (1644-58). Time permitting we will enter to have a brief look inside.

From here we board our cycle rickshaws for a tour of Chandni Chowk (Silver Street). Here we are given a glimpse into an old world lifestyle slowly fading from Delhi. The hustle and bustle of everyday life can be felt in the Chandi Chowk's narrow lanes. We will reboard our bus after the rickshaw ride, going past the Red Fort (photo stop), and we disembark at the Raj Ghat, set within a beautiful park. This national monument is where the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, was cremated.

After a stop for lunch we continue our sightseeing with a visit to Humayan's Tomb, an excellent example of Mughal architecture, predating the Taj Mahal by almost 100 years. Persian in style, this is a beautiful red sandstone building inlaid with black and white marble.

We will finish our day with a visit to the Qutub Minar. Few other monuments are as closely identified with Delhi as the Qutub Minar, this first monument of Muslim rule in India. It heralded the beginning of a new style of art and architecture which came to be know as the Indo-Islamic.

Overnight in Delhi. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Delhi - Mandawa*

After an early breakfast we depart for Mandawa, arriving early afternoon.

The town of Mandawa lies in the heart of Shekhavati, a semi-arid region located in the northeast part of Rajasthan, famous for its heritage havelis and colourful fresco art. As you approach it, Mandawa emerges from the sand like a mirage. Wind your way through two imposing gateways up to Mandawa Castle. The handsome rugged fort of Mandawa was built in 1755 by Thakur Nawal Singh, who also founded the town of Nawalgarh.

In the afternoon, wander through the streets to admire the mansions of the Goenkas, Sarafs, Ladias and Chokhanis with their imposing gateways and elaborate frescoes. A painted arched gateway adorned with Lord Krishna and his cows leads to the bazaar. Tie and dye fabrics flutter in the breeze, skilled hands craft colourful bangles in lac and cobblers make leather shoes embroidered with gold thread.

Overnight in Mandawa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Mandawa - Shekhavati - Bikaner*

After breakfast we drive to Bikaner, arriving around midday. En route, we stop at some of the ancient settlements of Shekhavati.

Founded at the close of the 15th century, Bikaner stands on high ground, surrounded by fine embattled walls. The 16th century fort contains palaces, temples and a mosque, mostly made of red and yellow sandstone. The marble images are considered to be the finest specimens of Hindu art.

Within the massive edifice of the fort, the entrance of which is flanked by two life-size effigies of elephants, are housed some of the rarest gems of Rajput civilisation. The Durbar Hall is in Mughal style, lavishly decorated with paintings. Gilt reliefs, glass mosaics and lace- like mirrors adorn the intimate and graceful Zenana -- the women's wing, separated from the main palace by a broad courtyard with panelled niches.

Overnight in Bikaner. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Bikaner - Manvar*

After breakfast we drive to Manvar, an ideal base to explore the Indian desert life, culture, wildlife and natural beauty. On arrival, we check-in at our comfortable desert camp in time for lunch.

This afternoon we enjoy the unique desert atmosphere for which this region is famous. Keep an eye out for the chinkara -- a shy gazelle -- as they make way across the silent sands. Watch the children trotting off to school, while their mothers prepare their afternoon meal on dung-fire. Our village tour by jeep will allow us to share the fascinating culture of these friendly people and enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of this vast desert.

The evening is enlivened by a campfire, mashaals (traditional songs), and local musicians and dancers. With stunning sunrises, mesmerizing sunsets and dazzling night skies, life in this peaceful wilderness is spectacularly elemental -- and extraordinarily silent.

Overnight near Manvar. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 12 *Manvar - Jodhpur - Luni*

After breakfast drive to Luni.

En route we stop at Jodhpur. This is the land of the valiant Rathore kings, whose courage was a match for the tyranny of the Thar Desert. A bleak scarp rears up 120 meters from the desert valley. Straddling the rocky crevices is the massive Jodhpur Fort, its sheer walls reflecting the strength of its warrior builders. The fort is entered through seven gates, each a formidable barrier. The museum within the fort is one of the finest in Rajasthan and displays royal apparel, ancient paintings and manuscripts, fabled treasures of the royal household and an armoury. An interesting section displays folk musical instruments from different regions of Rajasthan. Delicately latticed windows and pierced screens worked in sandstone form the dominant motif within the rugged casket of the fort and the palaces are exquisitely decorated.

On arrival we check in at Luni.

Overnight in Luni. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Bishnoi Village Jeep Excursion*

After breakfast, we will visit the Bishnoi village by jeep. The Bishnois are a fascinating community which follows the 29 (bish-noi) tenets laid down by the 15th century Guru Jambeshwar. They fervently believe in the sanctity of animal and plant life so all animals live near their villages without fear. When a Bishnoi dies, he is sometimes buried in the sitting position and often placed at the threshold of the house or adjoining cattleshed. A Bishnoi believes he will later be reincarnated as a deer, hence the herds of blackbuck often seen near their villages.

Later we travel to Ranakpur where we spend the night.

Overnight in Ranakpur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Ranakpur - Udaipur*

After breakfast we depart on our drive to Udaipur.

En route, we visit the famous Jain temples of Ranakpur which lie buried in a shady glen and cover a vast area. The central temple is called Chaumukha (four-faced) and is the most complex and extensive of Jain temples in India, covering an area of over 40,000 sq. feet (3600 sq metres). Its 29 halls are supported by 1,444 pillars, none of which are alike. Subsidiary shrines in the shape of side alters throng around in all directions, including a temple dedicated to the Sun God which displays erotic carvings.

On arrival in Udaipur, check-in at the hotel.

Overnight in Udaipur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Udaipur: City Tour*

Our morning sightseeing in Udaipur includes a visit to the City Palace, which stands on the crest of a ridge overlooking Lake Pichola. The largest palace in Rajasthan, it was built at various periods but still preserves the harmony of design, enhanced by massive octagonal towers surmounted by cupolas. Now a museum, it is a labyrinth of courtyards richly decorated with inlaid mirror-work, galleries covered with frescos, temples and roof gardens, which afford a wide panorama below. The Jagdish Temple in the old town was built in the mid-17th century and has a remarkable bronze statue of Garuda, the mythical bird, facing his revered master Lord Vishnu.

Sahelion-ki-Bari (Garden of the Handmaidens) is a good example of the Hindu art of landscape gardening on a princely scale. Ornamental pools with finely sculptured cenotaphs of soft black stone are surrounded by a profusion of fountains.

The afternoon is at leisure. The shops and craftsmen's ateliers in the narrow streets of the bazaar justify endless walks.

OPTIONAL (approx $10): In the evening take a boat ride on Lake Pichola. The steel blue waters of the lake, artificially created in the 14th century, reflect the white phantom Jag Nivas Palace, now the Lake Palace hotel which was built in 1746 as the summer residence of the rulers, and Jag Mandir said to be built by Maharana Karan Singh for his friend Prince Khurram, who was later to become emperor Shah Jehan. Huge seamless stone slabs of translucent thinness where used. The rooms were embellished with inlaid stones -- onyx, jade, carnelian, jasper and agate.

Overnight in Udaipur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Udaipur - Pushkar*

After breakfast we depart on the drive to Pushkar. On arrival check in at the resort, set amidst orchards of Indian gooseberry and fields of roses. (As Pushkar is a holy town the resort serves no alcohol or non-vegetarian food, though a wide variety of vegetarian delicacies from around the world are on offer here.)

In the late afternoon we visit the Brahma temple. This town boasts of the only temple dedicated to Lord Brahma in the world. Lord Brahma is the Creator in the Holy Trinity of Gods. You get a chance to walk through the winding lanes of Pushkar before reaching the lake, which is magical at sunset.

An aarti (Hindu prayer ceremony) is arranged specially for you at the banks of the lake today. After the ceremony we enjoy a cup of tea on the banks of the lake before starting our journey back to the resort. Enjoy a traditional thali dinner at the resort.

Overnight in Pushkar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Pushkar - Jaipur*

This morning we depart for Jaipur.

This afternoon we explore Jaipur, one of the best-planned cities in India, built of rose-pink sandstone by the great astronomer-king Jai Singh II in 1727. The City Palace stands in the centre of the city. Part of it is still the Maharaja's residence, while most of the complex has been developed into a museum containing rare manuscripts, fine specimens of Rajput and Mughal paintings, royal apparel and an armoury. Jantar Mantar observatory was built by the founder of Jaipur, Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh. The huge stone instruments were devised to study the movements of the sun, moon and planets and are incredibly accurate. Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds) is the landmark of Jaipur. Built of pink sandstone with a delicate honeycomb design and rising five storeys high, it is composed of semi-octagonal overhanging windows, each with its perforated screen, which allowed the ladies of the court to look onto the main street without being seen.

Overnight in Jaipur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Jaipur & Amber*

After an early breakfast, we visit Amber, the capital for 6 centuries before Jaipur was built, 11 km north of Jaipur. Rising majestically on the slopes of a hill, this 11th century fort and palace complex is a blend of Hindu and Muslim styles -- the earlier constructions in the inner apartments designed by the Hindu founder are austere, while later constructions abound in the rich flourishes characteristic of Muslim influence. Experience the thrill of riding up to the fort on gaily decorated elephants, in the manner the Rajputs of old made their royal ascent centuries ago.

The afternoon is at leisure. You have time to wander through the colourful bazaars, a veritable collector's paradise where you can watch ancient craft forms: Meenakari or enameling work, exquisite jewellery in silver or gold sparkling with emeralds, rubies, white sapphires and dangling pearls. In tiny ateliers you can see the age-old tie-dye methods of cloth printing, miniature paintings on cotton or silk, statues hand-carved in wood or bone, fine metalwork and the renowned blue pottery of Jaipur.

Overnight in Jaipur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Jaipur - Fatehpur Sikri - Agra*

We depart for Agra. En route, stop at Fatehpur Sikri, the deserted sandstone city, which was the glorious but short-lived imperial capital of Akbar, the greatest of Mughal emperors. Lying on a rocky ridge, it is today a haunting complex of empty palaces, forts and mosques. A variety of architectural styles are found, since craftsmen representing many schools were employed.

On arrival in Agra, check in at the hotel.

Overnight in Agra. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Agra: Agra Fort & the Taj Mahal*

After breakfast we tour Agra. Visit the red sandstone Agra Fort, which stands like a crescent on the banks of the Jamuna River, enclosed by forbidding 20-meter high walls, with a 12-meter moat between them. Three successive Mughal emperors -- Akbar, Jehangir and Shah Jehan -- helped create this massive structure which contains Hindu and Muslim architecture.

The highlight of your trip will be a visit to the Taj Mahal, the greatest monument to love and one of the wonders of the modern world, constructed by Emperor Shah Jehan as a mausoleum for his beloved queen Mumtaz Mahal. Completed in 1652, skilled craftsmen from Persia, Turkey, France and Italy and some 20,000 labourers worked for 17 years to build this edifice. You have time to explore the bazaars and craftsmen's ateliers, where you can watch the ancient art of marble in-lay work.

Overnight in Agra. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Agra - Delhi - Depart*

Today we return to Delhi by road. Departure from Delhi.

NOTE: Passengers booking their own flights should take into account the road journey from Agra and NOT book flights that depart any earlier than 3:00 pm.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.