

The Desert Trails of Rajasthan

Departs February 2027

Blue Dot Travel





\$15,500 pp

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international flights

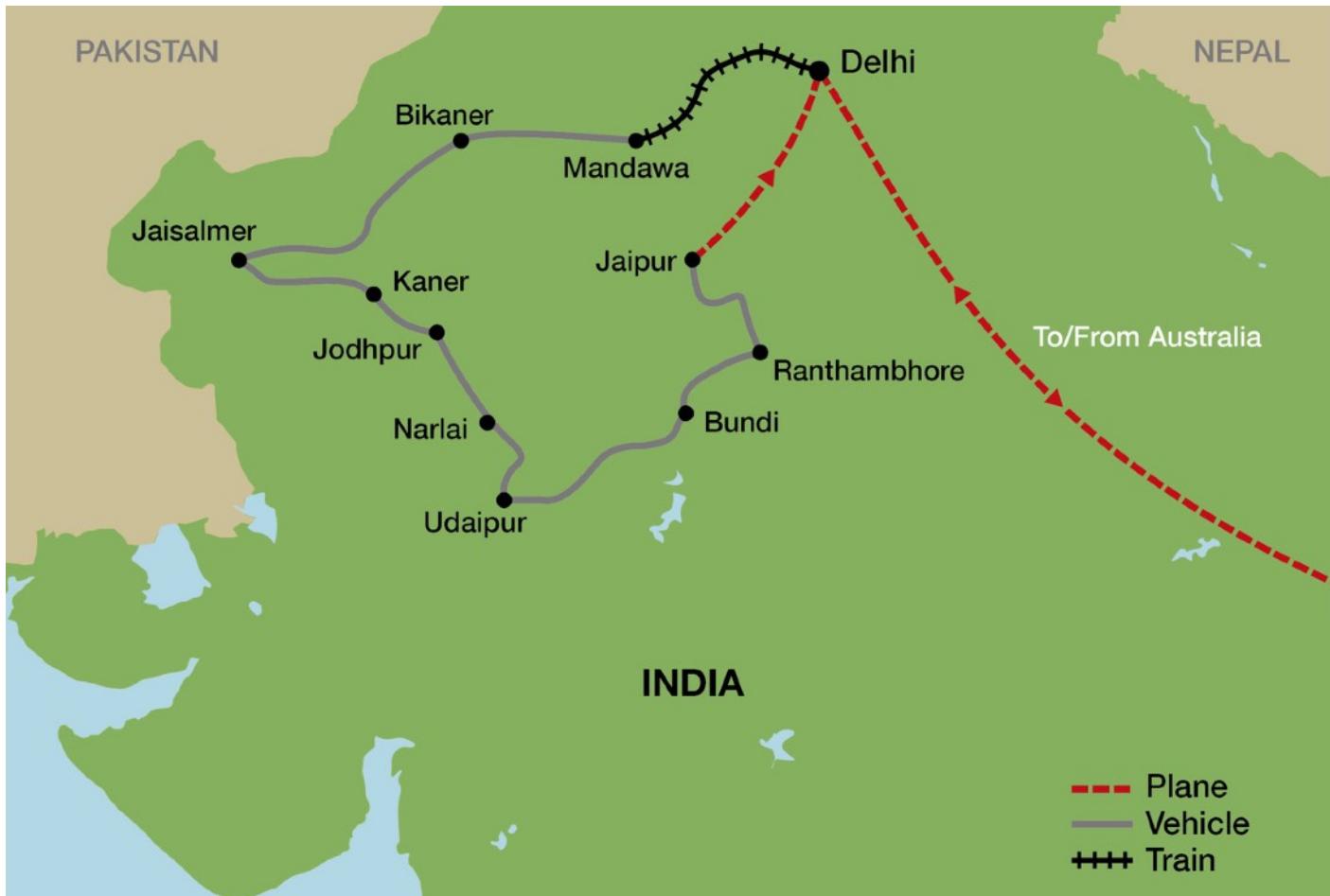
Solo supplement \$4,000

THE DESERT TRAILS OF RAJASTHAN

India is a study in contrasts: a historical backdrop for a modern-day industrial narrative, a traditional outlook co-existing with fresh, global lifestyles, and an ensemble of ethnic disparities creating a cohesive cultural identity.

On the western part of the country, the desert state of Rajasthan brims with heritage, from its beautiful palaces and historic forts to the regal painted mansions, or "Havelis", where we stay. The desert folk with lineages of royalty intermingled with rustic communities have long endured the adversities of the land. Their ways of life evolved in the arid environment — from the cuisine using the desert plant life, to clothing helping them stand against dunes, and from the folk music that sings of water and wells, to the dance forms that mimic the desert wildlife. On this journey, we explore this resplendent and fascinating region.

Follow our Desert Trails of Rajasthan for an insight into what made ancient fiefdoms flourish and learn of their lost and lingering legacies!



Departure, Tuesday 2nd February IN TRANSIT

Depart from Australia for Delhi. Our group flight will arrive at Indira Gandhi International Airport in the evening. We will be transferred to our hotel in a private vehicle. Check in and relax in the comfort of the Claridges Hotel (or similar).

Day 1, Wednesday 3rd February DELHI

After breakfast, we will visit several of Delhi's core sights. Firstly, visit the Gandhi Museum to learn about his life, particularly how he led the country against British colonial rule. Then we'll head to the Dilli Haat Art & Craft markets, where you can purchase locally designed items and have lunch. Later, we will visit the UNESCO-listed Humayun's Tomb before returning to the hotel to freshen up before the group welcome dinner. *B/D*

Day 2, Thursday 4th February DELHI

As a capital of many empires, Delhi has witnessed the ebb and flow of rulers across history, leaving their cultural influences on the city – from the Tughlaq dynasty to the Mughal empires, from the imperial colonial stronghold to the present-day government. Today, Delhi is a cosmopolitan city, one of the greenest capitals in the world, and a flourishing political and cultural capital of the country. We'll begin our exploration of Delhi with a trail that takes us through the city's colonial-era architecture. We'll drive past the India Gate, a monument commemorating the deaths of over 70,000 Indian

soldiers in the British Forces during World War I, and older British buildings that house today's President's residence, Parliament, and Secretariat. We'll continue to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Humayun's Tomb – a red sandstone edifice constructed in the 16th century, which became the first Garden Tomb in India built by the Mughal rulers. Later, we'll head down to Old Delhi, one of India's biggest trading centres. Follow the narrow lanes to reach Haveli Dharampura for lunch. Enjoy Mughlai cuisine

with a meal at this heritage hotel tucked in the city's old quarters. After lunch, explore Chandni Chowk on cycle rickshaws. The bustling marketplace houses an interesting assortment of stores selling everything from jewellery to sarees, and numerous eateries have also been established along these lanes. You'll also ride past churches, mosques, and temples, walk through a wholesale spice market, and smell the freshly cooked street food as you immerse yourself in the quirks of Old Delhi. Return to our hotel with dinner at a local restaurant. *B/D*



Day 3, Friday 5th February DELHI – MANDAWA

We'll be transferred to Delhi Cantt railway station early in the morning to board the train to Mandawa, a 4-hour journey. Train travel in India can be a grand social experience if you are well-informed about what to expect. Each coach on the train has an attendant

responsible for distributing bed rolls, looking after older people, and ensuring the compartment and facilities are clean. We'll hop off at Churu station, which is very long (be prepared to walk), where a vehicle will be waiting to pick up the group and transfer to our heritage haveli. Lying along an old caravan trade route, the Shekhawati region is renowned for the grand old painted mansions, or "Havelis," of the wealthy merchant class, the Marwaris. Mandawa bears witness to a rich history, with numerous havelis, and indisputably holds the claim that the Shekhawati region is among Rajasthan's lesser-known marvels. On a guided walk of Mandawa in the afternoon, we'll explore the frescoed town, with several murals narrating their strange tales, featuring amusing effects created by a lack of perspective, where horses may be as large as houses. The walk will end with a sundowner at a boutique property overlooking an old well. Once a neglected merchant home, this haveli has been revamped into a cozy heritage property with modern amenities. We'll arrange a high tea with cookies and sandwiches. Return to the hotel for dinner. Our two-night stay in Mandawa is at The Legacy Mandawa (or similar). *Tip: Grab some fruit or buns from the breakfast buffet for lunch on the train. **B/D (+ high tea).**

Day 4, Saturday 6th February MANDAWA

The Shekhawati region resembles an open-air art gallery with paintings from the mid-19th century. An excursion to Nawalgarh offers an even better perspective of how the Havelis looked, functioned, and evolved when they lived in. About 30 km from Mandawa, this was another estate of MahaRao



Shekha, the founder of Shekhawati, and has some of the best-preserved havelis of the region. Nawalgarh also gives an insight into the lives of the merchant community of this region. The Goenka Haveli in Dundlod and the Poddar Haveli are some of

the most well-maintained Havelis and have now been converted into museums. Return to the hotel with the afternoon at leisure or stroll around the vibrant bazaar – where curious local ingredients will catch your eye. Dinner at the hotel. **B/D**

Day 5, Sunday 7th February MANDAWA – BIKANER

After breakfast, we'll take the 3-hour drive to Bikaner, one of the three great desert kingdoms of Rajasthan. It prospered because of its strategic location on the overland caravan trade route to Central Asia and China. The Shekhawati region is renowned for its painted mansions, a testament to the prestige of the Marwaris, a wealthy merchant class. The region resembles an open-air art gallery with paintings from the mid-19th century. It bears witness to a rich history, with numerous havelis, and indisputably holds onto the claim of being among the lesser-known marvels of Rajasthan's landscape. In the afternoon, we'll visit the

16th century Junagarh Fort and Prachina Museum housed in the fort complex. Junagarh Fort dominates the city centre, and its history is intertwined with Bikaner's. Commissioned by Raja Rai Singh, one of Emperor Akbar's most distinguished generals, Junagarh remained an impregnable bastion that had never been captured. As you walk from the Fort past the decorative havelis, let our storyteller guide narrate the city's illustrious history of reign, riches, and ruin. The Prachina Museum showcases royal costumes, textiles, and Rajasthani royal accessories within the Junagarh Fort. The Poshaks (garments worn by ladies) are a reminder of the now-lost craft of traditional designs, styles, and artistry. The family portraits on display narrate how changing cultural settings influenced the style of immortalising former rulers. We'll organise dinner at a special venue at the hotel today. We'll stay two nights in Bikaner at the Narendra Bhawan (or similar). **B/D**

Day 6, Monday 8th February BIKANER

After breakfast, take a walking tour of the old city known for its intricately carved jharokas – enclosed overhanging balconies popularised by Mughal

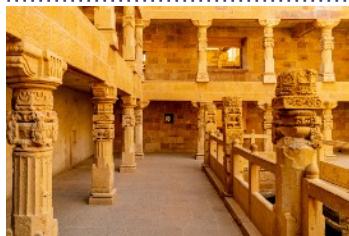


architects. Bikaner's old city is a tribute to architectural finesse and historical richness. Its meandering streets and exquisitely adorned havelis, featuring intricately crafted facades, carved wooden or stone jharokhas, and jaali work (stone or latticed screen), offer a captivating glimpse into the city's bygone era. Amidst the well-preserved Havelis, the lanes of the old city still have the spirit of being a prime centre for trade commerce on the Silk Road, with a bustling marketplace filled with shops of sweetmeats, handicrafts, and leather articles still flourishing. We'll take a high tea or lunch at Bhanwar Niwas, a 100-year-old haveli of the Rampuria merchant family, who were prominent merchants and traders during the British Raj. The haveli, with an intriguing architectural mix of Rajasthani and European styles, has been renovated in parts and runs as a boutique heritage hotel. In the afternoon, drive to the National Research Centre for Camels. Bikaner boasts of some of the world's best riding camels and is nicknamed camel country. A visit to the research centre provides insights into the science and folklore behind camel milk, hide, and hair – and you'll return with a newfound respect for these animals. You can also visit an art studio that produces Bikaner-style miniature paintings. Developed in the 17th century, this art form captures intricate details on a small scale but emphasises vibrant colours. Depicting a diverse range of themes – mythological stories, royal scenes, and everyday life—often with a regional flavour, the art form has a unique storytelling ability. Dinner is at your leisure tonight. **B/L**

Day 7, Tuesday 9th February BIKANER – JAISALMER

After breakfast, drive to Jaisalmer, the golden city—a tagline given due to its distinctive yellow sandstone

architecture that gives it a golden hue, especially during the sunset. This is a long but rewarding drive of over 5 hours. We'll stop for lunch at Fort Pokaran, a 14th-century fort converted into a heritage hotel. Check into your hotel – the Gorbandh Palace for two nights (or similar). **B/L**



 **Day 8,
Wednesday 10th
February
JAISALMER**

Once upon a time, Jaisalmer was a bustling caravanserai along the Silk Route, and the royal Rajput clan grew wealthy, collecting taxes from merchants en route from India to Afghanistan. As with all trade, in due course ransacking and pilfering led to feuds between the royal clans and the Delhi Sultanate, and the Jaisalmer fort was captured, forcing its people to flee to nearby areas that are now in present-day Pakistan. Following the regimes of the Mughal and Maratha Empires and the British annexation, Jaisalmer's trading glory faded with the establishment of seaports. Today, Jaisalmer is preserved as a World Heritage Site. Its pale-yellow sandstone structures resemble a shimmering mirage in the desert, and it has the whimsical exoticism of a bygone, fairy-tale era. This morning, after breakfast, we'll visit Jaisalmer Fort and Haveli. In the afternoon, we'll drive to Kuldhara, a deserted village west of Jaisalmer, abandoned in the 13th century and considered haunted. Here, we'll have high tea before returning for dinner at the hotel. **B/D**

 **Day 9, Thursday 11th February
JAISALMER – KANER**

After breakfast, the group will drive to Kaner – about 3.5 hours' drive. On the way, stop at an olive farm offering more than just a break – an inspiring example of determination. About a decade ago, Satbiri Devi, a forward-thinking farmer, planted Olive saplings from



the Negev Desert in Israel on her 40-acre farm. Today, with over 6,000 olive plants, the farm produces organic extra virgin olive oil – marking the success of agriculture in the desert landscape. Enjoy a stroll

through the Olive groves and enjoy a Mediterranean-inspired alfresco lunch. Then, drive to India's first botanical desert resort – Kaner Retreat. Kaner Retreat is the brainchild of Sapna Bhatia. Growing up on a small farm in Jodhpur, she often spent her childhood days with her grandmother, learning about the benefits and usage of desert plants. Later, she graduated in Botany and pursued her master's in international journalism, which led her to become a successful BBC TV journalist. The retreat's cuisine also reflects her understanding of local and international cultures. Later in the afternoon, we'll discover the principles of plant-based wellness, health, and healing in an interactive session with Sapna. Then, walk alongside her as she takes you on an immersive journey through the

desert's botanical landscape. Savour a 'Thali' dinner served under the stars with the warmth of a bonfire. Stay at Kaner Retreat for two nights. **B/L/D**

 **Day 10, Friday 12th February
KANER**

Very early this morning, we'll drive to see the migrating cranes in a village around an hour's drive from the hotel. This is a "not to be missed" experience as the sight and sound of thousands of birds will stay with you forever. You'll receive a light breakfast while learning about why they come to this spot each year. Return to the hotel for snacks and learn about the Raika community's unique relationship with camels. The camel herders believe Lord Shiva created them to safeguard these majestic creatures. You'll find that camels are beyond mere livestock. Here, they are a source of celebration, deeply ingrained in local folklore and music. The community goes the extra mile, creating delicate camel jewellery to express their deep affection. Late afternoon, enjoy a thrilling drive to the dunes and dive into the beauty of the Thar Desert. As the sun casts its golden hues across the landscape, you'll feel a sense of wonder. Then, back to the hotel for dinner. **B/L/D**



 **Day 11, Saturday 13th February
KANER – JODHPUR**

Today we drive to Jodhpur – about two hours. On arrival, we'll check into our hotel. Epitomising the romance and feudal splendour of Rajasthan with the striking Mehrangarh Fort



towering over it, the city of Jodhpur was once a flourishing trade centre for opium, silk, and copper. Painted a brilliant shade of blue, Jodhpur is the last bastion of fort ramparts, colourful bazaars, and animated people with their storytelling traditions before the desert sands and dunes stretch away toward the horizon. After lunch, we'll stroll the bazaars. In this community hub, you'll find everything from traditional handicrafts to copper pots, vegetables to spices, daily essentials to lip-smacking snacks and sweets. As it is known, Sardar Bazaar has several beautiful havelis primarily made of red sandstone. Return to the hotel where we'll stay for two nights at Ratan Villas (or similar). **B/D**

 **Day 12, Sunday 14th February
JODHPUR**

After breakfast, you'll visit Mehrangarh Fort – one of the most majestic of Rajasthan's forts, described by the author Rudyard Kipling as "the creation of angels, fairies, and giants." Its forbidding ramparts are in sharp contrast to the flamboyantly decorated palaces within. Founded in 1459, the sandstone fort was added to by later rulers between the 17th and 19th centuries. We'll take some tuk tuks to the entrance

and explore the massive fort complex and the exquisite museum collection. From the Fort, we'll head to a local pawn shop (more of an antique and textiles emporium) for an opportunity to look and buy. Then we will head back to the hotel for lunch before taking another tour via tuk tuk and visiting the narrow alleys leading to Old City, which has a mysterious quality to its quiet lanes, exquisite havelis, and pale indigo walls. Our guide will take us through the lanes to teach us more about the proud heritage of the city's inhabitants. You'll explore the streets, stores, and hawkers selling several snacks and sweets, including mirchi vada, khoya, mawa, gulab jamun, laddoo, lassi and more. We'll drive back to the hotel in the evening, enjoy an exclusive Bhopa-Bhopi traditional Rajasthan folk performance and then have a rooftop dinner. The region of Marwar has birthed numerous tales of heroic deeds, and its thriving tradition of Bhopa Bhopi has maintained a symbolic attachment to this inspiring folklore. The Bhopa community comprises nomadic people from the Thar Desert. They are well known for their rich, traditional storytelling. The performance by the Nayaks (wandering balladeers) is akin to the Greek concept of a chorus, in which songs of heroism are passed down through generations and recited alongside the Phad (scroll), which depicts the important events. In the nomadic tradition, a long Phad (a scroll) is painted with various images that show the historical events of a great Rajput hero. A male narrator tells a story while the females dance at various interludes. **B/D**



arrival, we'll have lunch at the hotel and then after lunch, a local, along with our guide, will take us for a village walk for about an hour or so. Walk around the 17th-century village - an authentic glimpse into rural living against the stunning backdrop of the Aravalli hills. The village's way of life has been shaped by the natural terrain surrounding it. You'll discover how the undulating landscape has influenced the village's architecture, with homes and buildings designed to harmonise with the land's contours, and how it has also offered a haven for wildlife. The village folk share a deep connection with nature and the land they call home. Yet, life has continued much as it was back in the day – peaceful and unhurried, before heading back to the hotel. Then the group will take a 4WD to a memorable high tea. Look out for the many bird and wildlife species along the way. Your hotel in Narlai for two nights is the delightful Rawla Narlai. **B/L (+ high tea)**

Day 14, Tuesday 16th February NARLAI

We'll depart early in the morning for a leopard safari around Narlai, looking for the elusive felines. (Rug up as it can be a little cool in the open air safari trucks).

The rugged Godwad countryside around Narlai suits the leopards, and their numbers have increased. Return to your hotel for breakfast and spend the day at leisure. (Tip, the local shop owner has a boutique close to the hotel and has some wonderful garments for sale). In the afternoon, enjoy another jeep safari under the expertise of resident naturalists and try spotting these species basking in the sun on the rocks. Then, we'll return to the hotel and enjoy a fabulous Step Well dinner tonight and taste the flavour of true Rajasthani royal hospitality at the 16th-century Baoli (Stepwell). Not to be missed! **B/D**

Day 15, Wednesday 17th February NARLAI – UDAIPUR

After breakfast, we'll drive an hour to visit Ranakpur Jain Temples, set in a secluded wooded valley of the

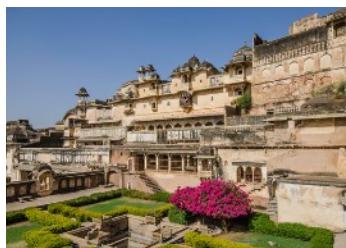


Aravali Hills. The 15th century temple complex is one of the five great holy places of the Jain faith. The grand scale and the sheer architectural complexity of the white marble temple, along with its exquisite sculptural ornamentation, make it the single most impressive example of Indian temple architecture—a hymn in marble. Then we'll transfer to Ranakpur for lunch. Later, we begin our drive to Udaipur, an oasis nestled in the lap of the Aravali Mountains. Originally a thriving caravanserai, it became the capital of local royal clans. Udaipur is unlike any city you'll visit in Rajasthan. Its serene lakes, beautiful gardens, and magnificent palaces evoke a sense of nostalgia that has often earned it the title of one of the most romantic places in the world. Apart from being a historical place, Udaipur has been immortalised in contemporary culture in iconic films, including Richard Attenborough's cinematic masterpiece Gandhi. Later in the evening, enjoy a stroll on Gangaur Ghat. When the sun begins to set, the ghat comes alive with a gentle buzz of activity. The transition is stunning, and the walk is a true sensory journey! Our two-night stay in Udaipur is at the Taj Fateh Prakash Palace (or similar). **B/L**

Day 16, Thursday 18th February UDAIPUR

Today starts with a visit to the City Palace. With its blend of stern Rajput military architecture and lavish Mughal-inspired decorative art, it is the largest palace in Rajasthan, spanning 5 acres and built between the 16th and 20th centuries. Continue to the Jagdish Temple, a three-storied architectural wonder featuring an intricately sculpted spire and beautifully carved pillars. Time permitting, we'll head back to the hotel for a short time to freshen up before heading to lunch via tuk tuk to the Royal Repast restaurant. There'll be a little free time after lunch to enjoy the hotel or explore the old town to discover the various facets of markets, artists, and artisans at work. Mughal miniatures top the list, but other forms include handicrafts like puppet-making, wood carving, clay sculpting, and metal embossing. (A tuk tuk can take you into the old town to spend a little time in the busy streets). At

sunset, enjoy a tranquil ride on Lake Pichola, listening to the water lap against your boat. It is one of the most beautiful ways to get to Udaipur. Admire the setting sun, creating an orange glow that engulfs the surroundings, with the Aravali mountains on one side and the City Palace on the other. **B/L**



 **Day 17, Friday 19th February**
UDAIPUR – BUNDI

After breakfast, the group will drive for about 4 hours to the little town of Bundi, often described as the undiscovered jewel of Rajasthan.

Surrounded on three sides by the rugged, thickly forested Aravali hills, this walled town has retained much of its historic character. It is noted for its ornate forts, palaces, and baoris (stepwells), as also the frescoes in the Bundi Palace and the miniature paintings that adorn its walls. On the way, visit the 12th-century Bijolia Temples that stand as evidence of their era's architectural and artistic excellence. The detailed carvings and structural ingenuity mirror the dedication and skills of the craftsmen behind their creations. The temples provide a window into the religious practices and cultural heritage of that time, offering insight into the past. Later, you'll visit the Taragarh Fort, constructed by the Chauhan dynasty in the 14th century. The fort was strategically positioned as a defensive bastion against potential invasions. Its high vantage point, affording sweeping landscape views, enabled it to serve as a sentinel, guarding the region from adversaries. We have a one-night stay at Bundi– Dev Niwas (or similar) tonight. **B/D**



Day 18, Saturday 20th February
BUNDI – RANTHAMBORE

After breakfast, we'll depart for the 3-hour drive to Ranthambore National Park, one of India's first wildlife sanctuaries declared a

protected forest under Project Tiger in 1974. The dedicated efforts to conserve forests and protect tigers have resulted in healthy tiger numbers in Ranthambore National Park. Spend the rest of the day in the comforts of your hotel, where we will stay for three nights at Khem Villas (or similar). **B/L/D**

Day 19, Sunday 21st February
RANTHAMBORE

Enjoy morning and afternoon safaris through the ruined ramparts in search of the Royal Bengal Tiger. Ranthambore is also home to the common leopard, nilgai (blue bull antelope), wild boar, sambar, hyena, sloth bear, grey langur, rhesus macaque, and chital. There will be some downtime to enjoy the hotel's wonderful grounds. **B/L/D**

Day 20, Monday 22nd February
RANTHAMBORE

Most wildlife enthusiasts come to Ranthambore with just one agenda— to catch a glimpse of the tiger. But, while sighting a tiger might be the ultimate thrill, the overall jungle experience is something to be treasured. The silence, the misty mornings, and the sights, sounds, and smells of a forest are a rare delight for most city inhabitants. In fact, for ears used to the jangle of traffic, just the sound of silence can be very tranquil, especially when you are inside the park in the morning. After your game drives this morning, you'll head to Fateh Café for breakfast to learn about the person who established Ranthambore NP and the support they provide for the community. Head back to the hotel for some downtime before visiting Dhonk Crafts, a non-profit organisation spearheaded by Divya Khandal, around 3.00 pm. Dhonk provides sustainable livelihoods for the community's women by teaching them crafts, embroidery, and tailoring techniques, which they use to make a range of handmade products, including ethnic prints in modern styles. Sales proceeds go towards paying wages and sustaining the non-profit's operations. Tonight, your farewell dinner will be under candlelight at the hotel by the pond. **B/L/D**



Day 21, Tuesday 23rd February
RANTHAMBORE – JAIPUR – DELHI

Enjoy a leisurely breakfast at the hotel before being driven to Jaipur airport – about 3.5 hours - to board a flight to Delhi or Mumbai for an overnight stay at the airport hotel (or to the next destination). **B**

Wednesday 24th February
DEPARTURE or OPTIONAL EXTENSION TO JAIPUR, AGRA AND VARANASI

Today, we'll be transferred to the airport for our homeward-bound flight, or you may choose to continue your stay with a 6-night post-tour extension to Jaipur, Agra, and Varanasi. (Cost to be confirmed). Ask us for details. **B**



Icon indicates a day where there is **mild physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.



Icon indicates a day where there is a **moderate physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.

Icon indicates a day where there is a **particularly active section**. A good level of fitness is required: eg. A longer trek over non-groomed, uneven terrain, or ascending to reach a panorama. May also include exposure to higher altitude. **An alternate activity may be offered if you choose to sit out an active section.** Please call - we are happy to discuss each tour in more detail.